

H-Diplo ROUNDTABLE XXII-34

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INTRODUCTION BY DAVID ANDERSON, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, MONTEREY BAY, EMERITUS, AND NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

Wars typically have at least two sides, and to understand fully any military and political conflict the motivations and performance of all parties must be considered. For many years the history of the American war in Vietnam—or, as Pierre Asselin aptly titles his study, *Vietnam's American War*—was drawn largely from an ever-increasing pool of U.S. sources. Asselin is one of a talented cohort of scholars who for some years now have had the archival access and language skills to write a more complete—two-sided—history with Vietnamese documentation.¹ Asselin's earlier monographs contributed significantly to discovering and analyzing Hanoi's actions from Vietnamese sources.² *Vietnam's American War* now provides a concise and accessible historical synthesis of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's (DRV) conduct of the war from beginning to end that is firmly rooted in his and others' previous scholarship. This volume has few footnotes, but readers can see from the citations provided, the annotated bibliography, and the generous acknowledgements at the beginning of the book how much it reflects the depth of Asselin's expert knowledge of the subject and his long engagement with it.

The three reviews in this forum by leading scholars of the war affirm the importance and quality of this survey of Vietnamese Communist decision-making during the war and the value this book has for classroom use to complement the many surveys available on American policy. For readers of H-Diplo, however, they also probe Asselin's points of interpretation and his arguments in the lively and on-going scholarly dialogue on the war. Each reviewer brings insights from his own research, and all three remark on the centrality in Asselin's narrative of Le Duan, the first secretary of the Vietnam Workers Party, who held the key position of power in Hanoi's leadership council beginning in the late 1950s and continuing for more than 20 years. Asselin appropriately and correctly notes the important analysis of Le Duan's role by Lien-Hang Nguyen based on evidence and accounts in Vietnamese and western languages. In his annotated bibliography, Asselin suggests that his monograph *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War* and Nguyen's *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* “complement each other nicely, and together constitute the most comprehensive assessment of Vietnam's American War based on Vietnamese archival sources” (255).³

I have often wondered if presidents Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon even knew who Le Duan was. From early on, U.S. leaders thought primarily of Vietnam as a Cold War abstraction with little attention paid to individuals in the Politburo in Hanoi. Johnson thought he could bargain with President Ho Chi Minh like he would with some kind of American labor leader. In 1969 with Ho near death, Nixon was addressing letters to the father of the Vietnamese revolution, although Ho

¹ See for example, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Robert K. Brigham, *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Vietnam War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999); Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002); Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, The United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016); Geoffrey C. Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngo Dinh Diem's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); and Sean Fear, “Saigon Goes Global: South Vietnam's Quest for International Legitimacy in the Age of Détente,” *Diplomatic History* 42:3 (June 2018): 428-455.

² Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

³ Nguyen, *Hanoi's War*. Nguyen and Paul Thomas Chamberlin are co-editors of the Cambridge Studies in U.S. Foreign Relations of which *Vietnam's American War* is a part.

had not governed for years. U.S. intelligence maintained a file on the secretive Le Duan, but this organizational knowledge did not readily filter up to the Oval Office. When Ho died in September 1969, National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger's staff identified four possible successors to Ho as chief of state and made a 'guess' that Le Duan might initially emerge as leader. Kissinger briefed the president, but CIA Director Richard Helms advised Nixon that "Le Duan may be on the decline."⁴ With the exception of a few passing references in 1961, 1965, and 1966, these briefings are the first discussion of Le Duan in the pages of *Foreign Relations of the United States*, and only a few occasional mentions appear thereafter. For historians who are studying the war, the invisibility of Le Duan in official U.S. documents underscores the importance of work like that of Asselin and the reviewers in this roundtable to uncover the inner-workings of Vietnamese politics and society.

A historian who has written important works on the long history of Vietnam, Keith Taylor⁵ heralds Asselin's book as a "breakthrough" in its demonstration of Le Duan's tight control over the DRV, countering Hanoi's propaganda image of a war fought by heroic volunteers. He finds that the brevity of some of the background sections preceding Asselin's discussion of the American war tends to discount the Emperor Gia Long's opposition to French colonial demands and to romanticize Ho Chi Minh and demonize South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem. He applauds, however, the main thrust of Asselin's book, the insights into Hanoi's management of its American war, and why and how its military and diplomatic strategy was successful.

Edward Miller also compliments Asselin's "no mean achievement" in piercing the shadows that have surrounded Le Duan and the Politburo to detail intra-party conflicts and how they shaped the DRV's strategy against the Americans. Having done his own work on crafting a political and intellectual portrait of South Vietnam's leaders, Miller would like to know more about Le Duan's vision and philosophy behind his political actions.⁶ Along with Taylor and Andrew Gawthorpe,⁷ Miller hopes that Asselin's work will prompt a full biography of Le Duan and more research on the mix of personality and impersonal historical dynamics in the success of the DRV against American power and purpose. Because Vietnam today is still a highly controlled society, such investigations will continue to require the work of intrepid researchers like Asselin.

Gawthorpe and Miller both highlight Asselin's use of the term "patriotic internationalism" (110-11) to denote Hanoi's—and particularly Le Duan's—ideology. They see the phrase as useful but also begging for more explication. This hybrid concept is not new to scholarly efforts to characterize Vietnamese communist thought. Such pioneer historians of Vietnamese Communism as William Duiker, Douglas Pike, and Carlyle Thayer, in differing ways, combined concepts of patriotic nationalism and international communism in their studies.⁸

⁴ U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976*, vol. 6, *Vietnam, January 1969-July 1970* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006), 391. See also 369-370.

⁵ Keith Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University Press of California, 1983); Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁶ Miller, *Misalliance*.

⁷ Andrew J. Gawthorpe, *To Build as well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

⁸ William J. Duiker, *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*, 2d ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996); Douglas Pike, *History of Vietnamese Communism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1978); Carlyle Thayer, *War by Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Vietnam, 1954-1960* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989). More recently, Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, wrestled with this subject.

For readers of the literature on the war, which is still primarily American-centered, Gawthorpe makes the important point that Asselin's appreciation for Hanoi's strategic thought directly challenges the treatment of "America's enemies as blank slates," as have many writers who continue to this day to insist on a "win thesis" which holds that only American mistakes, not Vietnamese ability, determined the war's outcome. In his footnotes, Miller references the provocative recent article by Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations."⁹ In assessing the roles of the belligerents in the American war in Vietnam, the relative power of each side and definitions of that power remain contentious.

All three reviewers find that Asselin "admirably" closes some of the gaps of perspective in the literature on the war and look forward to future excellent contributions from him to provide the balanced scholarship that full understanding of the war requires.

Participants:

Pierre Asselin received his Ph.D. from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. He currently holds the Dwight E. Stanford Chair in US Foreign Relations History at San Diego State University. He is the author of *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (2002), *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (2013), and *Vietnam's American War: A History* (2018). His latest article, "Forgotten Front: The NLF in Hanoi's Diplomatic Struggle, 1965-67," appears in *Diplomatic History*.

David L. Anderson is professor of history emeritus, California State University, Monterey Bay, and senior lecturer of national security affairs, Naval Postgraduate School. The author or editor of numerous books on the American war in Vietnam, his most recent is *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2020), which blends memoir and historical research. He is a past president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and a U.S. Army veteran of the Vietnam War.

Andrew J. Gawthorpe is a University Lecturer at Leiden University. He previously held positions as a teaching fellow at the U.K. Defence Academy, research fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, and civil servant in the British Cabinet Office. He is the author of *To Build as well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018) and in a number of publications such as *Foreign Affairs*.

Edward Miller is Associate Professor of History at Dartmouth College. He is a historian of Modern Vietnam, the United States in the World, and the Vietnam War. His publications include *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Harvard, 2013) and *The Vietnam War: A Documentary Reader* (Wiley, 2016). He is currently working on a book-length study of the civil war aspects of the Vietnam War in the Mekong Delta. He is the director of the Dartmouth Digital History Initiative, a digital humanities project to develop data visualization tools for use with oral history archives.

K. W. Taylor is Professor of Sino-Vietnamese Studies in the Department of Asian Studies at Cornell University. He has published many books and articles about Vietnamese history and literature, including *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

⁹ Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentering the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3:2 (Spring 2020). This article was the subject of another H-Diplo roundtable, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-42>.

REVIEW BY ANDREW GAWTHORPE, UNIVERSITY OF LEIDEN

According to Pierre Asselin's faculty web page at San Diego State University, his fascination with the Vietnam War began the same way it did for many of us – cinematically. In Asselin's case, it was a viewing of the movie *Rambo: First Blood Part II* which whetted his appetite. In the decades since this unlikely beginning, Asselin has produced a prodigious body of scholarship on the war from the North Vietnamese perspective.¹⁰ The section of the historiography that Asselin has contributed to has seen a number of notable publications in recent years, particularly those by Lien-Hang T. Nguyen and Tuong Vu.¹¹ But until now it has lacked a single-volume history which covers the entire period of the war and is not only useful for scholars, but also accessible to the general reader. *Vietnam's American War* fills this gap admirably.

Asselin's focus in this work is on how the major decision-makers in North Vietnam made strategic decisions and managed their war effort in such a way that they ultimately "defeated the American goliath" (1). In justifying his focus, Asselin argues that North Vietnamese decision-making has been systematically understudied in the literature on the Vietnam War. It is as if, he argues, historians had studied World War II "without delving into – indeed, making any serious effort to relate – the goals, strategies and motivations of Adolf Hitler and the Nazi regime in Germany" (7).

While there have been honorable exceptions – particularly the works of Tuong Vu and Lien-Hang Nguyen cited above – it is certainly true that much of the literature on the Vietnam War has been so American-centric that it has tended to explain the war's outcome in terms of American deficiencies rather than North Vietnamese successes. This choice of focus calls to mind the remark of Confederate General George Pickett, who when asked why his side lost the American Civil War responded that "I always thought the North had something to do with it."¹² As Pickett was suggesting, placing the 'other side' at the center of analysis forces us to take their experience seriously, and only in doing so can we get closer to an understanding of what took place. Such an understanding makes it much more difficult to argue, as many still try to, that the Vietnam War might have been won by the United States if only the Congress had kept its nerve or some particular counterinsurgency 'genius' had been allowed to dictate American strategy.¹³ Such arguments are dangerous because they have so frequently been weaponized to argue for the possibility of success in more recent wars. On the other hand, Asselin's project implicitly argues against seeing America's enemies as blank slates or abstractions who could be defeated with the right combination of political will and military technocracy. Instead they must be taken seriously.

With his purpose established, Asselin proceeds to his narrative. As he notes, while his narrative is not exhaustive, it does have a comprehensive scope (8). This is true in two important respects.

The first is that *Vietnam's American War* devotes attention to the whole range of issues and policies with which the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) had to wrestle as they pursued their war. Alongside strategic decision-making, Asselin discusses cognate topics such as the domestic politics of North Vietnam, its war economy, its international

¹⁰ Especially Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954 – 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

¹¹ Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

¹² See Marc Gilbert, *Why the North Won the Vietnam War* (London: Palgrave, 2002).

¹³ Max Boot, *The Road not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright, 2018).

relations, and the experiences of its soldiers and civilians. This provides us with a more detailed understanding of the North Vietnamese experience of the war than any previous single volume.

Asselin's discussion of the North Vietnamese home front is a particularly valuable part of his book. Books on the Vietnam War which neglect this topic can too easily give the impression that the inhabitants of the DRV were near-automatons, fanatically devoted to their country's reunification whatever the personal cost. This 'yellow horde' narrative clouds our appreciation of the immense personal sacrifices demanded of North Vietnamese communities in service of the war effort, and the problems this created for the DRV regime. As Asselin argues: "If we never speak of popular opposition to the war in North Vietnam as we do in the United States, it is not because it was non-existent, or that Hanoi's cause was more righteous than Washington's; is it because the DRVN's propaganda and security apparatus preempted it" (129–30). Asselin tells us that propaganda by the DRV authorities consistently downplayed the fact that the war was mainly fought against other Vietnamese rather than against the Americans. The deaths of many Northern soldiers were not reported to their families until the war was over, and those wounded in battle were not allowed to return home for fear of the impact they might have on civilian morale. Asselin's coverage of these topics helps to make his account well-rounded and humane.

The second sense in which Asselin's narrative is comprehensive is the extent to which it is embedded in both the pre- and post-history of the war. Many older general histories of the war are so focused on the American perspective that they promptly shift their focus back to the United States in 1975, examining the legacies of the war for America. Asselin instead considers how the legacies of the war influenced the DRV's attempt to assimilate South Vietnam after 1975. While this material is not new to scholars who have studied post-war Vietnam, it is instructive for the general reader to consider the ways in which the political and economic legacies of the war made Vietnam difficult to govern in the late 1970s and 1980s. Asselin does not shrink from describing the "veritable death camps" (235) into which many southerners were herded after the war, nor the lingering animosities between Northerners and Southerners. He describes how war heroes were given prominent positions in state-owned enterprises, contributing to mismanagement which by the mid-1980s made rationing necessary, something that had rarely happened even during the war.

Asselin's judgements on the motivations and competency of the DRV's leadership are well-balanced. He labels the ideology of the Vietnamese Communist leadership "patriotic internationalism," stressing that their ideology was an amalgam of communist and nationalist elements (111). The DRV, he says, was a "quintessential Stalinist police state, a totalitarian political entity" (110). Asselin stresses that it was the very deliberate actions of those who held the levers of power in this state – particularly Lê Duẩn – that ultimately brought victory over the Americans. In doing so, he is in a sense restoring the agency of North Vietnamese actors, which narratives based on the historical inevitability of their victory – or the decisive power of impersonal forces such as nationalism – tend to subtly deny. In such a highly-centralized political system, the agency of those at the top mattered a great deal. Asselin argues that Lê Duẩn and other Communist leaders showed "grit, resourcefulness, and remarkable organizational skills," but that they also made "tragic miscalculations" for which the Vietnamese people paid dearly (250–1). To admit this is not to detract from the miscalculations and crimes perpetrated by the United States during the war. It is instead to reach a more complete understanding of the whole.

This focus on North Vietnamese agency is slightly in tension with Asselin's judgement that the American war in Vietnam merely "delayed the inevitable" (250). Such a statement can seem to open the door again to determinism, but if one reads carefully this is not the case. What made the DRV's victory inevitable was the single-mindedness and ruthlessness of Lê Duẩn and his colleagues in Hanoi, not impersonal historical forces. As Asselin writes: "As long as Lê Duẩn remained at the helm, Hanoi was never going to give up its goal of reunifying the country under the authority of the Communist Party" (250). Asselin is equally clear-eyed on the question of whether the war could have been ended earlier through negotiations. It could have, he argues, but only through the "capitulation" of the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies (134).

As a single-volume history of the Vietnam War from the North Vietnamese perspective, this book will be hard to beat. Given its intended audience and scope, it would be churlish to complain about what was left out, and instead it is to be hoped that this volume whets the appetite of a new generation of Vietnam War scholars – perhaps even more so than a viewing of *Rambo*. Such scholars could carry out their own research into some of the topics about which this book leaves the

reader wanting to know more, such as everyday life, popular culture and quotidian resistance in North Vietnam, and how they were all intertwined with the war.

Teachers should consider assigning this book to their students alongside one of the many general histories of the war which focus on the American perspective. This is an opportunity not just to juxtapose the experiences of two sides to the same war, but also to consider broader questions about legitimacy, democracy, and ideology in the global Cold War.

Asselin has written a fine book, and we will be returning to it for years to come.

REVIEW BY EDWARD MILLER, DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

In October 2013, the *New York Times* published its obituary for General Võ Nguyên Giáp, Vietnam's most famous Communist military commander. Joseph Gregory, the author of the obituary, singled out the 1968 Tết Offensive during the Vietnam War as one of Giáp's signature achievements. Although the offensive was a "failure" from a military standpoint, Gregory asserted, it still brilliantly demonstrated "Hanoi's determination to win" and served to undermine American popular support for the war. Gregory thus not only depicted Giáp as the mastermind behind the Tet Offensive but also credited him with leading North Vietnam to its eventual triumph over both the United States and South Vietnam in 1975.¹⁴

Both of these claims made by Gregory about Giáp's role in the Vietnam War were inaccurate. By the time of Giáp's death in 2013, research by historians had demonstrated that Giáp actually *opposed* the plan for the Tet Offensive and played no role in its design and implementation—indeed, he was not even in Vietnam when the offensive was launched in early 1968.¹⁵ And while Giáp's overall role in strategic debates in North Vietnam for the duration of the war remains unclear, Gregory's suggestion that he was the most important strategist in Hanoi throughout the conflict is undermined by evidence from archives in Vietnam and from the later testimony of Communist Party insiders. By 1967, if not earlier, Giáp had been targeted by rivals in the senior leadership of the Party who effectively neutralized his ability to participate in debates over policy and strategy.¹⁶

Instead of relying on the flawed conventional wisdom about Giáp and his role in the war, Gregory would have done better to consult the work of Pierre Asselin. Since the early 2000s, Asselin has emerged as a leading figure in the scholarly efforts to open up the black box of wartime policy- and strategy-making in Hanoi. In a series of deeply-researched articles and books, Asselin has combined the results of painstaking spade work in Vietnamese archives and libraries with careful reading of the Communist Party documents that have been published in the *Văn Kiện Đảng* (Party Documents) series, as well as other official Vietnamese publications.¹⁷ This work has enabled Asselin not only to shed new light on key strategic debates and decisions in Hanoi during the war, but also to overturn some long-standing interpretations of the motives and concerns that lay behind those strategic choices. In his latest book, *Vietnam's American War*, Asselin continues along the same path and seeks to situate some of his earlier findings into broader historical perspective.

Unlike Asselin's earlier books, *Vietnam's American War* is a survey history, not a monographic presentation of new research findings. More specifically, it is a prewar-to-postwar narrative account of the Vietnam War from the perspective of Vietnamese Communist Party leaders. Unusually for a text published by an academic press, Asselin has not included citations to most of the primary-source evidence on which his interpretive claims are based. As a result, each chapter of *Vietnam's American War* contains just a handful of endnotes, most of which reference direct quotations from secondary sources. Those readers who have questions about primary sources are advised by Asselin "to consult my other, more exhaustively referenced works" (14). This unorthodox decision is all but guaranteed to cause dissatisfaction among

¹⁴ Joseph R. Gregory, "Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap, who ousted U.S. from Vietnam, is dead," *New York Times*, 4 October 2013; <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/05/world/asia/gen-vo-nguyen-giap-dies.html>.

¹⁵ Merle Pribbenow, "General Vo Nguyen Giap and the Mysterious Evolution of the Plan for the 1968 Tet Offensive," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3 (Summer 2008): 1-33.

¹⁶ Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967–68," *Cold War History* 5:4 (2005): 479-500.

¹⁷ Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

specialists. Such complaints aside, Asselin's decision to use a minimalist citation scheme underscores the narrative and synthetic qualities of this text.

Like most of Asselin's prior work, *Vietnam's American War* is heavily focused on political leaders—specifically the leaders of the North Vietnamese state, known officially as the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN). The leaders of that state were also the senior leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party, known during the war as the Vietnam Worker's Party (VWP). In adopting this focus, Asselin is not ignoring the myriad other actors and factors which shaped the course and outcome of the Vietnam War. Indeed, he duly acknowledges the importance of decisions and missteps made by U.S. leaders, the attitudes of non-elites in both North and South Vietnam, the role of international public opinion, and the impact of the Sino-Soviet split. Nevertheless, the central characters in the book are the men who directed the DRVN/VWP war effort from Hanoi. "Above all, we must understand the personalities, motivations, though process, and strategies of Vietnamese communist decision-makers," Asselin writes in his introduction. "That is, we must see the conflict—and the world—through their eyes." (1) This is a worthwhile goal, given the secrecy that has long surrounded the inner workings of the DRVN state. Nevertheless, Asselin's depiction of these leaders and their *weltanschauung* is not as complete or as convincing as it might have been.

Throughout *Vietnam's American War*, Asselin depicts VWP leaders as remarkably skilled in their abilities to steer resources, people and events to their advantage. At the same time, he places great weight on the steely resolve of these leaders to realize their ambition of a unified Vietnam under VWP rule. The result is a representation that sometimes seems reminiscent of the "great man theory" of history employed by nineteenth century European historians:

The outcome of the Vietnam War was determined not by the patriotism of its people or the sum of its battles, but by the grit, resourcefulness, and remarkable organizational skills of Le Duan and other Vietnamese communist leaders. These men carefully and meticulously managed their struggle and the human and material resources necessary to sustain it for as long as necessary. They were obsessed with discipline and internal cohesion, and adhered to their basic positions with unshakeable tenacity. Despite daunting logistical challenges and tragic miscalculations of their own doing, they maintained close and effective control of their party and armed forces... Admittedly, those forces lost many if not most battles, but successes on the political and diplomatic fronts offset all setbacks on the military front... allowing Hanoi to win the war. (250-251)

In calling attention to the 'great man' aspects of *Vietnam's American War*, I do not mean to suggest that the book is a partisan defense of VWP policies and strategies, or that it paints VWP leaders in hagiographic hues. On the contrary, Asselin offers numerous criticisms of VWP leaders and their actions both during and after the war. In portraying VWP leaders as men of 'unshakeable tenacity' who could bend history to their will, Asselin is not celebrating their victory or sympathizing with them.

Nevertheless, the 'great man' qualities of Asselin's argument beg important questions about historical causality, and about the impact that leaders have on the actual course and outcomes of wars. Few historians of the war would dispute that the convictions of VWP leaders and the strategies they embraced were important aspects of Vietnam War history.¹⁸ But *how* were they important? What were the actual causal links between Communist leaders' convictions and their strategic decisions on the one hand, and the course and outcome of the war on the other? And was the indomitable will of VWP leaders really the single most decisive factor that produced the Communists' eventual triumph?

¹⁸ This is true even though some U.S. Foreign Relations scholars argue that the work of scholars like Asselin who use Vietnamese archives is "decentering" the role of the United States in the conflict; see Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, "Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations," *Texas National Security Review* 3:2 (Spring 2020): <https://tnsr.org/2020/04/recentering-the-united-states-in-the-historiography-of-american-foreign-relations/>; and the H-Diplo roundtable on the article, <https://hdiplo.org/to/RT21-42>.

To evaluate Asselin's answers to these questions, we must zero in on his arguments about the "formative experiences and worldview" of the VWP leadership (8). *Vietnam's American War* presents a great deal of evidence about how Vietnamese Communist leaders thought about international politics and foreign relations during the Vietnam War era. Asselin places particular emphasis on the centrality of the Cold War in their thinking, and on their conviction that "the fate of the world... and thus the fate of Vietnam, rested on the course of the looming struggle for world domination between the capitalist and communist superpowers" (9). He also provides readers with a detailed assessment of the impact of the Sino-Soviet split on the outlook and strategic decisions of VWP leaders, especially after the rivalry between the People's Republic of China and the Soviet Union intensified in the early 1960s (92-93). At the same time, Asselin does not neglect the Communists' attention to rise of "Third World" nationalist and non-aligned states, and their efforts to use DRVN diplomacy and propaganda to cultivate support from across the Global South (144-145). On the whole, *Vietnam's American War* paints a cogent and convincing picture of VWP leaders' understanding of the international political environment in which they operated, as well as the diplomatic strategies they adopted.

Nevertheless, to describe VWP leaders' *views of world politics* is not the same as describing their *worldview*. While there is no consensus among scholars over the meaning or analytical utility of the concept of a 'worldview,' those who employ the concept have typically understood it as a kind of ideological formation. Since VWP leaders were communists, it seems reasonable to suppose that their worldview was shaped at least in part by Marxism-Leninism. Asselin readily acknowledges this, but he also recognizes that it is too clever by half to simply reduce the VWP worldview to general Marxist-Leninist principles. Instead, he asserts that VWP leaders embraced what he describes as a "syncretic adaptation" of Marxism-Leninist ideology. The term that Asselin coins to describe this adaptation is "patriotic internationalism." This term, Asselin explains, is intended to show that VWP leaders were "not communists in the classical sense... nor were they mere nationalists... they were an amalgam of elements" (110-111).

At first glance, Asselin's notion of 'patriotic internationalism' seems like a useful way to describe the VWP leaders' worldview. For decades, the commitments of Hồ Chí Minh and other VWP leaders to Communism and nationalism have been cast in binary and zero-sum terms. Scholars and other authors have long argued over the relative importance of nationalism vis-à-vis communism in Hồ's thinking.¹⁹ Along the way, they have often overlooked the distinctive ways in which nationalism and Communism were intertwined in his mind and the minds of other VWP leaders. 'Patriotic internationalism' thus appears to promise a way a move beyond the conceptual limitations of an old debate.

On closer inspection, however, Asselin does not do nearly enough to explain the actual ideological content of the VWP version of 'patriotic internationalism.' Most of the great national revolutions that have taken place over the last 250 years—from the American, French, and Haitian revolutions in the eighteenth century to the Chinese, Mexican, Russian, Cuban, and Iranian revolutions in the twentieth century—have been *both* nationalist *and* internationalist, insofar as their proponents have viewed the transformation of their home countries as a potential catalyst for revolution on a regional or global scale. Indeed, one of the striking continuities in the history of modern revolutions is the propensity of revolutionaries to promote their national liberation agendas as internationally exportable models. Thus, the fact that Vietnamese Communist leaders were both patriots and internationalists is therefore not particularly surprising. The more salient question is: what kind of patriotic internationalists were they?

¹⁹ Classic works in this vein include William Duiker, *The Rise of Nationalism in Vietnam, 1900-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1976); Huynh Kim Khanh, *Vietnamese Communism: 1925-1945* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Archimedes Patti, *Why Vietnam? Prelude to America's Albatross* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982). More recent iterations of this debate have been more nuanced in their treatment of the connections between Hồ's nationalist and Communist identities; see Alec Holcombe, "The Role of the Communist Party in the Vietnamese Revolution: A Review of David Marr's *Vietnam: State, War, and Revolution (1945-1946)*," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11:3/4 (2016): 298-364; and David G. Marr, "Response to Alec Holcombe's JVS review essay on *Vietnam: State, War and Revolution (1945-1946)*," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 12:1 (2017): 155-162.

Unfortunately, *Vietnam's American War* does not provide a clear answer to this question. Although Asselin frequently references Marxism-Leninism, Stalinism, Maoism, and other categories associated with the history of twentieth-century communism, he has remarkably little to say about what these categories actually meant to VWP leaders. This lacuna is particularly pronounced in his discussion of the man who founded both the VWP and the DRVN, Hồ Chí Minh. In his discussion of VWP history during the 1930s, Asselin describes how Hồ was attacked by Moscow-trained “radicals” who espoused a “Stalinist, ultra-leftist” position and who deemed Hồ to be “too nationalist” (33). A few pages later, Hồ is said to have “ceased toeing the Soviet line” in 1941 and to have “moved toward closer, fuller ideological alignment with Mao [Zedong] and the Chinese Communist Party” (38). But the implications of Hồ’s embrace of Maoism are not explained. Did Hồ deem Maoism to be more congenial to his nationalist instincts than Stalinism was? Did he in fact see Stalinism and Maoism as incompatible or antithetical? If so, how do we know that he did? Given Mao’s staunch and consistent admiration for Stalin over the course of his career, the depiction of Hồ as simultaneously anti-Stalinist and pro-Maoist cries out for more explanation.

The ambiguity surrounding Hồ and his ideological convictions is further exacerbated by Asselin’s depiction of the VWP founder as a “moderate” who waged a 30-year struggle against the “radicals” in the party who aimed to marginalize him (34). Asselin is far from the first scholar to portray Hồ as more flexible and pragmatic and less doctrinaire than many of his fellow VWP leaders.²⁰ However, he is vague about what lay behind this ideological flexibility, or how it explains Hồ’s support for particular policies at particular times. For example, how did Hồ’s status as a “moderate” square with his evidently staunch support for the DRVN’s land reform program of 1953–1956, which recent research shows was modelled directly on Maoist forms of mass mobilization, and which were specifically aimed at fomenting class consciousness and class struggle?²¹ Was Hồ a “moderate” Maoist? And if he was a Maoist in the 1940s and 1950s, what accounts for his abrupt abandonment of Mao Zedong during the early 1960s, when Asselin says he “leaned toward the Soviet Union” and its advocacy of “peaceful coexistence” with the West (94)?

The problematic aspects of ‘patriotic internationalism’ as an explanatory framework are also evident in Asselin’s discussion of Lê Duẩn, the other VWP leader who figures prominently in *Vietnam's American War*. If Asselin depicts the VWP leadership as “great men,” he portrays Lê Duẩn as the greatest of them all.²² In Asselin’s account, Lê Duẩn was “battle-hardened” by his experience as head of the Central Office for Southern Vietnam (COSVN) during the First Indochina War; he is also said to have espoused a “zealous, fanatical commitment to national liberation and reunification” (110). This combination of resolve and toughness put Lê Duẩn at odds with Hồ—who, Asselin tells us, was viewed as a ‘softie’ by his comrades, especially after he agreed to the compromise peace negotiated at the Geneva Conference in 1954. According to Asselin, Lê Duẩn’s hostility to Hồ helped him emerge as the leader of the VWP’s radical faction during the late 1950s, and then vaulted him into the role of the party’s General Secretary in 1960. In late 1963, at the Ninth Plenum of the VWP’s Central Committee, Lê Duẩn outmaneuvered Hồ, Giáp, and the other moderates by winning support for Resolution 9, a document that called for a dramatic escalation of the Communists’ armed struggle in South Vietnam. For Asselin, the plenum and the resolution amounted to “a bloodless, quiet palace coup” that effectively eliminated the influence of Hồ and

²⁰ See, for example, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

²¹ Alex-Thai D. Vo, “Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10:1 (2015): 1–62.

²² Although Asselin promises in his introduction to explore the “personalities, motivations, thought process, and strategies of Vietnamese communist decision-makers,” the only VWP leaders whom he examines in detail are Hồ and Lê Duẩn. Other powerful figures such as Lê Đức Thọ, Trường Chinh, Nguyễn Chí Thanh, Trần Quốc Hoàn, and Giáp receive far less attention, and some key players—such as Lê Văn Lương, who served in the VWP’s secretariat and preceded Thọ as the head of the VWP’s powerful Organization Committee—are not mentioned at all.

the moderates in Hanoi. “By early 1964,” Asselin writes, “Le Duan had become North Vietnam’s new paramount leader” (109).

But what was the actual substance of Lê Duẩn’s zealotry and fanaticism? What was the ideological vision that drove his “radical” opposition to Hồ’s putatively “moderate” and “dovish” policies? While Asselin presents Lê Duẩn and Hồ as antagonists and rivals, the role of ideology in the rivalry is hard to pin down. Indeed, in Asselin’s telling, Lê Duẩn appears similar to Hồ, in that he appeared to bounce from one ideological position to another—or even to abandon ideology altogether, when it suited him to do so. When Lê Duẩn is first introduced in Chapter 3, Asselin tells us that his “radical” inclinations stemmed from his embrace of the ideology of Chinese communism, and specifically by his enthusiasm for the PRC’s “revolutionary militancy.” “Hanoi under Le Duan would actually prove more radical, more dogmatic, more ‘Chinese’ than the Chinese themselves,” Asselin states (112). However, in the wake of the 1968 Tết Offensive—an event that Asselin characterizes as “a major strategic victory” for Hanoi from a “psychological standpoint” (158)—he portrays Lê Duẩn as suddenly shedding his ideological affinity for Maoist militancy in favor of a “more pragmatic” approach (160). By late 1968, Asselin asserts, Hanoi had “suspended major combat operations” in South Vietnam, a move that “signaled the abandonment of the Maoist revolutionary model” (166). As a historian who believes that ideology should be taken seriously in the study of the Vietnam War, I find these last two claims especially difficult to accept.²³ If Lê Duẩn could drop his ideological convictions as easily as removing a pith helmet, how important could ideology have been to him in the first place?

I suspect that at least part of the problem with Asselin’s Lê Duẩn has to do with sources and methods. As noted above, Asselin has been a pioneer in accessing previously off-limits collections of DRVN archives in Vietnam; he has also incorporated the steadily growing volume of published DRVN and VWP materials into his work. This fine-grained approach has allowed Asselin to reconstruct the evolution VWP policy and strategy for the Vietnam War in remarkable detail, and to glean many new insights about the year-by-year evolution of Hanoi’s approach to the war.²⁴

For all its strengths, however, Asselin’s approach also has drawbacks. In charting the strategic road that Hanoi took to war in painstaking detail, Asselin often neglects the broader ideological landscape over which VWP leaders were travelling. This problem is especially evident in his treatment of Lê Duẩn. Despite the fact that Lê Duẩn is the most important figure in *Vietnam’s American War*, Asselin does not explore his background, or the origins of his ideological commitments. Born in 1907, Lê Duẩn spent the first half of his life as a colonial subject of France’s Indochinese empire. It seems reasonable to suppose that Lê Duẩn’s revolutionary outlook might have been shaped not only by his early engagements with Marxism-Leninism (which began in the late 1920s) but also by his encounters with colonial culture and institutions, especially during the years he spent as an employee of the Indochina Railway Service. Yet Asselin glosses the first 47 years of Lê Duẩn’s life in a single paragraph (89).

This lack of attention to Lê Duẩn’s pre-1954 experiences stands in marked contrast to Asselin’s treatment of his post-1954 career, which is far more detailed. But even here, Asselin is much better at showing what Lê Duẩn *did* than at explaining

²³ I am not aware of any evidence showing that DRVN leaders ordered the suspension of major combat operations in South Vietnam in 1968—or at any other time prior to the 1973 Paris Peace Agreements. Nor am I persuaded that the VWP abandoned the Maoist model of revolutionary warfare after 1968. The only evidence that Asselin offers in support of these claims is a quotation from a later account by U.S. pacification official Robert Komer, who stated that the losses sustained during Tet ‘68 forced Hanoi “to revert to a protracted war strategy in 1969-1971.” But a shift to protracted warfare hardly constitutes a suspension of major combat operations. Moreover, as Komer knew well, protracted war is a key concept in Mao’s theory of revolutionary war; by depicting the VWP as “reverting” to such a strategy, Komer saw the party as returning to an earlier “stage” in the Maoist schema, rather than abandoning Maoism altogether.

²⁴ Two examples from Asselin’s earlier work illustrate this feature of his scholarship particularly well. First, see his skillful and nuanced reading of the famous document known as “Resolution 9,” adopted by the VWP Central committee in early 1959: Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 53-66. Second, see his re-interpretation of the reasons behind the DRVN decision to accept the compromise peace agreement at the 1954 Geneva Conference: Pierre Asselin, “The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique,” *Cold War History* 11:2 (2011): 155–95.

what he *thought* or *believed*. The references that Asselin makes to primary sources are particularly revealing in this regard. While he cites the documents that marked significant changes in VWP and DRVN policy and strategy—such as Resolution 15 of 1959 or Resolution 9 of late 1963—he mostly overlooks the many letters and other documents in which Lê Duẩn addressed theoretical and conceptual problems. There is no mention of Lê Duẩn’s 1956 manifesto “The Path to Revolution in the South”—arguably the most famous of all of his writings—in which he presented a doctrinaire analysis of the South Vietnamese state as a “neocolonialist regime.” Nor does Asselin cite “Letters to the South,” a published collection of early 1960s personal communications from Lê Duẩn to his southern comrades. In many of those letters, Lê Duẩn addressed questions of theory and doctrine, often by comparing the revolution in Vietnam to Communist movements in China, Cuba, and other countries. One particularly striking omission concerns Lê Duẩn’s concept of the “General Offensive, General Uprising.” Although Asselin briefly acknowledges that this controversial formula lay at the heart of Lê Duẩn’s strategy for the Tết Offensive (152), he does not examine the theoretical basis on which it rested, nor does he mention any of Lê Duẩn’s pre-1968 writings on the topic. Why did Lê Duẩn believe that Communist military strikes inside Saigon and other cities would trigger popular urban revolts against the South Vietnamese state—a belief that turned out to be spectacularly wrong? Surely his conviction in this disastrous idea had something to do with his ideology and worldview?

If Lê Duẩn’s background and ideology are the most notable absences in *Vietnam’s American War*, some of the factual claims in the text are also open to question. The early twentieth-century nationalist leader Phan Bội Châu never visited the Soviet Union (28); the petition that Hồ Chí Minh co-authored during the Versailles Peace Conference in 1919 did not mention the U.S. Declaration of Independence, nor did it appeal for Vietnamese independence—and indeed the words “independence” and “Vietnam” were both conspicuously absent from the text (31); Richard Nixon never visited the French garrison at Điện Biên Phủ, nor did he refer to it as an “impregnable fortress” (71); Ngô Đình Diệm did not spend three years living in a U.S. Catholic monastery prior to becoming leader of South Vietnam (74); and neither the VWP nor the communist-sponsored National Liberation Front ever depicted the conflict in South Vietnam as a “domestic dispute” into which the U.S. had intervened (103). The notion that North Vietnamese women were “empowered by the war” (121) is difficult to square with scholarly accounts showing the awful physical, emotional, and social toll that the war inflicted on the women and girls who served in the DRVN war effort.²⁵ It is also doubtful that President Lyndon Johnson decided in 1968 that “the United States needed to get out” of the Vietnam War (163); while Johnson claimed in March 1968 to be unilaterally reducing the “level of hostilities” in Vietnam, he actually increased the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam over the next year and also substantially expanded the Indochina-wide U.S. bombing campaign against communist forces during the same period.²⁶

None of these complaints are intended to imply that *Vietnam’s American War* is a fatally flawed book. Insofar as Asselin’s primary goal is to provide readers with a beginning-to-end account of the war from the point of view of Communist leaders, he succeeds very admirably. For me, the most appealing parts of the book are those in which Asselin does what he does best: pulling aside the veil of secrecy to reveal the intricate and shifting evolution of Vietnamese Communist decision-making during the war. He is particularly good at explaining how the Communists sought to link their strategies for armed and political struggle within Vietnam to their three-tiered diplomatic strategy to win support from fellow communist states, Third World audiences, and antiwar groups in Western countries (144-146). He also ably guides readers through the confusing twists and turns of VWP diplomacy and negotiating strategy in the years between Tet ’68 and the Paris Peace Agreement of early 1973, when Hanoi was both negotiating with Washington and also trying to manage its increasingly fraught relationship with Beijing, as well as its equally complex alliance with the Soviet Union. Throughout it all, Asselin keeps the focus squarely on the VWP leadership and offers revealing glimpses of the behind-the-scenes power struggles that pitted Lê Duẩn against Hồ, Giáp, and other senior VWP leaders. Given the confusion and obscurity that has long cloaked

²⁵ François Guillemot, “Death and Suffering at First Hand: Youth Shock Brigades during the Vietnam War (1950–1975).” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 4:3 (2009): 17–60.

²⁶ Edwin Moise, *The Myths of Tet: The Most Misunderstood Event of the Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2017), 169–171.

these intra-party dynamics, this is no mean achievement. While there is still a great deal about wartime Vietnamese Communist Party politics, policies, and strategies that remains in the shadows, Asselin is leading the way toward a deeper and more complete understanding of the war that Hanoi waged, as well as the military triumph it eventually won.

 REVIEW BY K.W. TAYLOR, CORNELL UNIVERSITY

This book narrates the war among the Vietnamese from the mid-1950s to 1975, focusing primarily upon the view from Hanoi. It is a breakthrough that escapes from the great cluster of clichés and myths from Hanoi's wartime propaganda that became the dominant interpretation of the war throughout the world, including the United States. It illuminates the central role of Lê Duẩn, the Secretary-General of the ruling (communist) party in Hanoi, in initiating and pursuing the war during five U.S. presidential administrations and achieving his goal of extending control over all Vietnamese territories. There is much to like in the clarity of this book's analysis of Hanoi's policy. It is grounded upon extensive research, is concise, and can be recommended for the classroom.

Asselin shows how the politics of the ruling party in Hanoi were related to war policy, how a preoccupation with absorbing the South came to overwhelm all other priorities, and he emphasizes the role of Lê Duẩn in consistently pursuing wartime goals. He poses an opposition in Hanoi between "doves" (exemplified by President of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam Hồ Chí Minh) and "hawks" (led by Lê Duẩn), which "had split the Communist Party into two rival wings," and that Lê Duẩn staged a "coup" after November 1963 to seize control of policy (10). This could be considered an excessively stark view of a more complex train of events, but Asselin's interpretation is based on evidence and is plausible.

Lê Duẩn was brought from the South and made the leader of the Party in 1957 because he was untainted by the uproars in the Party caused by the Land Reform and the disciplining of intellectuals over which the party leaders in Hanoi had presided. For him, a native of Central Vietnam and someone whose revolutionary career had developed in the South, a policy to overthrow the Saigon government was paramount. Major figures in the Party from a previous generation, such as Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and Phạm Văn Đồng, were less inclined to urge forward military activity in the South before their regime had had time to fully consolidate in the North. Lê Duẩn and his allies, particularly Lê Đức Thọ and Nguyễn Chí Thanh, who by the early 1960s had gained ascendancy in the Party hierarchy, were determined to pursue a policy of conquering the South. Lê Duẩn conducted periodic purges of people in lower echelons of the Party to maintain the momentum of his war policy, but the more interesting question is how the older generation of party leaders continued to play high-level roles despite the censoring or imprisonment of some of their subordinates. Perhaps an answer to this question involves a sense of public service among the first generation of revolutionaries that kept them within the consensus enforced by the leadership that emerged in the late 1950s.

On the first page of the introduction, Asselin poses a question to which the book is intended to respond: "how the Vietnamese David defeated the American Goliath." (1) In an exaggeration of the difference between 'the Vietnamese David' and 'the American Goliath,' North Vietnam is described as "puny," (2) which overlooks the fact that it benefitted from powerful allies capable of challenging American global dominance. This masks the participation of Hanoi's great-power allies in the war and ignores the existence of Hanoi's Vietnamese enemies, making the war a contest between Hanoi, pretending to represent all Vietnamese, and the United States; also, we have the myth that the Americans were 'defeated,' when in fact they simply abandoned the war. The book's focus is on Hanoi and Washington, with very little attention given to Saigon. The title of the book reflects this bias, conflating Hanoi with 'Vietnam' as if there were but one Vietnamese state involved in the war. This appears to distort the analytical thrust of the book, given the implication that millions of Vietnamese people did not exist. The book confines modern Vietnamese history to a narrow focus on 'Marxism-Leninism' as apparently the only ideology of significance for Vietnamese anti-colonialists. Without acknowledging the anti-colonial movements among Vietnamese in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s that were not 'Marxist-Leninist,' there appears to be nothing to account for the sudden existence of anti-Communists in Saigon in the 1950s except to imagine that they were simply an extension of American intervention.

Asselin explains the beginning of U.S. involvement in Indochina in 1950 as "a result of French manipulation ..., a consequent misreading in Washington of Vietnamese political realities, and the intensifying state of the Cold War." (9) "French manipulation" presumably refers to France setting up a client state in 1949 with the former emperor Bao Dai serving as figurehead in order to elicit American assistance. It is questionable whether the Americans were taken in by this because they were unable to "read ... Vietnamese political realities." In fact, there was much discussion in the American State

and Defense Departments with a great range of opinions that reflected a very clear understanding of the “French manipulation” and of “Vietnamese political realities.”²⁷ But what overwhelmed all reluctance to be tied to a French colonial trick was “the intensifying state of the Cold War” with the end of the Chinese Civil War, the beginning of Chinese military assistance to the Vietnamese communists, and the outbreak of the Korean War (9).

Discussing the Geneva Accords of 1954, Asselin writes that Hồ Chí Minh decided “to abide by the terms of the Geneva formula” while Ngô Đình Diệm “was sneering at the peace and reconciliation process and had no intention of participating in elections to reunify Vietnam under a single government.” (9) This romanticizes Hồ Chí Minh and demonizes Ngô Đình Diệm. Although the author is vague about what is meant by the ‘Geneva formula,’ presumably it involves the Final Declaration that asserted the unity of a sovereign Vietnam. In two years an election was to be held to unify the two parts of the country that the Geneva Accords in fact partitioned into two states, ostensibly as a temporary measure to separate warring armies. The author does not mention that this Final Declaration was not signed by any government and that Ngô Đình Diệm considered it to be a colonial agreement made over his head between the former colonial power and his Communist enemies. Furthermore, the provision in the Accords for the movement of populations between the two partitioned parts of the country implied that the partition was intended to be more permanent than temporary.

The Geneva Conference was held to remove Indochina from being a point of contention in the Cold War and indulged in a contradiction to do so. The great powers affirmed the theoretical unity of the country even as a way to implement that unity was postponed into the future. France, for its part, had ratified treaties of independence with Cambodia and Laos and had recognized the Vietnamese Communists at Hanoi, but never ratified a treaty of independence with the government in Saigon, despite negotiating and initialing such a treaty at the beginning of the 1954 Geneva Conference. From Ngô Đình Diệm’s perspective, France aimed to continue its supervision of the Vietnamese government in Saigon, which was why in 1955 it was important for him to defeat the sect armies that were allied with France and to hold the referendum in October of that year as a declaration of independence from France by repudiating Bao Dai through whom France continued to keep a hand in Vietnamese affairs.

According to Asselin, “It was not until 1959 that Hanoi sanctioned insurgent activity below the 17th parallel, but even then under restricting guidelines and with minimal support from the North.” (9-10) What the author means by “insurgent activity” is not specified, but there is plenty of evidence prior to 1959 for Communist activity to recruit adherents, to kidnap and to assassinate local officials and teachers, and to levy taxes. Since 1957, the leader of the Party in Hanoi, Lê Duẩn, was a man who until then had been in the South providing leadership for ‘insurgent activity’; in 1958 he went to the South for a first-hand look at what was happening there. Compared with the later commitment of the entire North Vietnamese army, it could be said that in the late 1950s Hanoi provided “minimal support” for the Southern insurgency, but certainly Hanoi ‘sanctioned insurgent activity’ before 1959.²⁸

The first chapter aims to provide a narrative of Vietnamese history prior to 1945. In doing so it encounters the myths and clichés that encrust Vietnamese nationalist historiography. The common assumption that “the Vietnamese people” have existed since antiquity enables modern nationalists to anchor their sense of identity deep in the past; for them, there is no perception that what it meant and means to be Vietnamese had a beginning and has a history and that it has changed dramatically through the centuries. It is imagined that it is possible to speak of the “Vietnamese” in ancient times as if they are the same as the people whom we now know by that name. Similarly, the term ‘Chinese’ is commonly used in this

²⁷ Ronald H. Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years of the U.S. Army in Vietnam 1941-1960* (New York: The Free Press, 1985), 77-104.

²⁸ Phan Thị Xuân Yến, “Ban Thống Nhất Trung Ương Với Công Tác Đào Tạo Phục Vụ Cho Sự Nghiệp Giải Phóng Miền Nam, Thống Nhất Đất Nước [The Party Central Committee’s Unification Commission and its Work in Training and Service for the Task of Liberating the South and Uniting the Country],” in Đinh Thị Thanh Thủy, ed., *Kỷ Yếu Hội Thảo Khoa Học: Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh Với Sự Nghiệp Giải Phóng Miền Nam Thống Nhất Đất Nước* [Conference Proceedings: Chairman Hồ Chí Minh and the Task of Liberating the South and Uniting the Country] (Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh: NXB Tổng Hợp, 2013), 306-307.

anachronistic way. Consequently, Asselin asserts that “The Vietnamese staged several rebellions during the millennium of Chinese rule.” (16) On this point, it helps to know that so-called “rebellions” or “righteous uprisings” of Vietnamese against Chinese rule during the first millennium C.E. that are listed by Vietnamese historians were all led not by indigenous people that we can identify with ancestors of the Vietnamese but by competing members of the ruling regime who responded to opportunities to pursue their ambitions when imperial authority was weak or incompetent; or they were groups from beyond the frontier seeking plunder; or, as in the case of the famous Trưng Sisters, it was a time before we can speak of the existence of “Vietnamese people.”²⁹

The ten centuries during which ancestors of the Vietnamese inhabited a frontier province of northern empires were mostly a time of peace and prosperity during which all the elements that we now associate with Vietnamese culture were acquired: religion and philosophy, education and literature, cuisine, social organization, vocabulary, and political organization. It is not possible to speak of ‘the Vietnamese people’ before this time—it was a result of the acculturation experienced then that what we know as ‘Vietnamese’ came into existence. Historians of the Vietnam War typically begin with the myth of ancient ‘Vietnamese’ resisting ‘Chinese domination’ for ‘one thousand years’ because it gives force to the idea that modern Vietnamese inherited some hoary skill enabling them to defeat foreign invaders. Asselin is much to be praised for admirably avoiding the use of this myth to predetermine the Vietnam War (17-18). In general, the author stays clear of most of the problems displayed by historians of modern times endeavoring to write about the premodern past.

One exceptional example is when Asselin gives credence to the myth created by French people about the origin of their colonial regime in Vietnam. The imagined genealogy of French colonialism posits that it was French assistance at the end of the 18th century that enabled the country of Vietnam, as we now see it on modern maps, to be created; this was a reassuring tale for French colonialists that seemed to provide a sense of legitimate ownership over the Vietnamese lands.³⁰ This myth was adopted by Vietnamese nationalists to charge that the Emperor Gia Long, founder of the Nguyễn dynasty in 1802, had sold the country to the French. In the author’s words: “In soliciting assistance from France to claim the mantle of imperial power, Gia Long sowed the seeds of his own nation’s demise. For the help they rendered, the French demanded special rights and privileges as concerned trade and Catholic missionary activity in Vietnam. Beholden to them, the Emperor had little choice but to meet their demands.” (20)

In fact, the treaty negotiated with France in 1787 on behalf of the future emperor was dead with the outbreak of the French Revolution two years later. A few French naval officers in Asia, opposed to the Revolution, deserted and sought adventures and fortunes in Vietnam; they provided some technical assistance to Gia Long’s military forces, but Gia Long was never “beholden” to them, and he never acceded to any French “demands.” Most Frenchmen who went to Vietnam in the early 1790s left within two or three years, deciding that they had been duped into vain expectations of martial glory and monetary enrichment. The Frenchmen in Vietnam were but a small part of what was a huge military organization that included thousands of men from several countries and ethnicities: Chinese, Cham, Ede, Malays, Khmers, Siamese, Laotians, and Portuguese. Gia Long was skilled in using foreigners, but he also knew how to avoid being indebted to them. The French colonial and Vietnamese nationalist myth about Gia Long betraying the country to the French is not based on evidence.³¹

One curiosity of the book is its proposing that there have been three civil wars in Vietnamese history. According to the author, the “First Vietnamese Civil War ended in 1009, with the founding of the Lý Dynasty.” (16) In fact, the Lý Dynasty was founded in 1009 by general acclaim, without violence, although there were several bouts of hostilities in the tenth century that could be counted as “civil wars.” According to the author, the “Second Civil War broke out in 1613 ... [and]

²⁹ K. W. Taylor, *The Birth of Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 56-249 passim; Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 14-50, 620-622.

³⁰ George Taboulet, *La Geste Française en Indochine*, 2 vols. (Paris: Adrien-maisonneuve, 1955).

³¹ Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 384-385.

ended ... [in the] late 18th century” (18-19). This conflates the 50-year Trịnh-Nguyễn wars of the seventeenth century with the 30-year Tây Sơn wars of the late eighteenth century. But it also ignores at least three other major “civil wars” that occurred before the seventeenth century: the Lý-Trần dynastic war in the early decades of the thirteenth century; the war waged by the provinces of Thanh Hoá and Nghệ An against the provinces in the Red River Plain in the second and third decades of the fifteenth century, albeit masked behind what Vietnamese historians consider to be national resistance against Ming Dynasty rule; and the Mạc-Lê dynastic war from the 1520s to the 1590s. The author’s “Third Civil War” began in the late 1940s and ended in 1975. Asselin’s purpose in featuring these civil wars is correct and important: that Vietnamese have fought amongst themselves more often than they have against foreign invaders. And, Vietnamese waged wars of aggression against upland minorities, against Chams, and against Khmers, taking possession of the lands of these peoples—displacing, subjugating, or assimilating them.

Hồ Chí Minh is romanticized and featured with a recitation of his official biography (30-31) and with the idea that he was a reluctant agent of the Communist International, being a nationalist more than a Communist (33), a “softie” compared with his colleagues (34), and inclined to follow Mao Zedong more than Joseph Stalin (38-39); while consonant with the cult and with a certain mythology of Hồ Chí Minh, this characterization accords poorly with overwhelming evidence of Hồ Chí Minh’s commitment to Communist revolutionary ideology and international proletarian solidarity.³²

Asselin writes of 1954 that Ngô Đình Diệm “had previously served as Minister of the Interior in the Saigon government” (74), implying that he had served in the pro-French Bao Dai government established in 1949 in Saigon. This is not true. He briefly served in the royal cabinet in Huế in 1933 when France pretended to give more powers to the monarchy, but he resigned after only three months when he saw that the French scheme was a sham and thereafter remained opposed to any collaboration with the French.

Asselin believes that the outcome of the war was “inevitable” (250). “Inevitable” implies that historical events are somehow determined beforehand. In retrospect, it may look that way, but to be able to prove such an idea one must have the omniscience of God.

The criticisms mentioned above are minor matters and of little or no consequence for readers focused on the period of the Vietnam War. This is an excellent book that provides readers with a sense of the war from the perspective of Hanoi, with greater clarity and in a more accessible format than any other book. Asselin’s account of Party politics and policy-making in Hanoi leading up to and during the war is the real strength of this book. Here his research competence and analytical ability are displayed with full force. I recently used this book with undergraduate students; they found the book to be readable, interesting, and enlightening. This book presents an informed and coherent view of why and how the Hanoi leadership persisted in its policy of war against Saigon for so many years despite disincentives and setbacks.

As Asselin demonstrates, the role of Lê Duẩn is central for understanding Hanoi’s wartime policies. He gathered like-minded colleagues upon whom he could rely, kept in line other senior Party figures who harbored doubts about his policies, maintained a firm grip on the inhabitants of his country, absorbed reversals, and never abandoned his goal of overrunning the South. This book implies that his gritty proletarian background and years of imprisonment, compared with the more elitist background of other senior members of the Party, and his experience of leading the Party in the South, are the context from which his leadership emerged. What this book now begs for is a biography of Lê Duẩn.

³² Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

 RESPONSE BY PIERRE ASSELIN, SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

I thank the reviewers for their thoughtful reviews of my work. Their criticisms are sensible and well taken.

I wrote this book to fill a gap in the historiography. While several English-language texts intended for a general readership address comprehensively the history of America's military involvement in Vietnam, no equivalent exploring the other side exists.³³ I genuinely enjoyed putting this book together because it allowed me to tell Hanoi's story as I have come to understand it after more than two decades of researching and obsessing over it. Unlike my previous works, I wanted this one to be accessible, suitable for university students as well as general readers, including so-called war buffs.

Vietnam's American War aspires to challenge the prevailing Western consensus on the war and the reasons for its outcome by underscoring the agency and exploring the decision-making of Vietnamese Communist authorities. It also seeks to expose and debunk enduring myths, misconceptions, and other fallacies about Vietnam and the Vietnamese recycled in popular works on the war. Bona fide Vietnam experts such as Keith Taylor 'get' Vietnam.³⁴ Unfortunately, few of them write about the American War and fewer still write about it with the general reader in mind. That largely remains the purview of U.S. diplomatic and military historians, most of whom cannot engage Vietnamese sources and thus rely instead on old, convenient tropes to describe the Vietnamese. Despite blatant, sometimes awful shortcomings and limitations, their works are still widely read, earning accolades and awards, and, perhaps most tragically, conditioning how the war is taught at both the high-school and university levels.

While interpretations of the American experience in Vietnam are variegated, that is not the case for the Vietnamese experience. Diplomatic and military historians tend to depict Communist decision-making, to illustrate, in simplistic, uncomplicated terms. They take no account of intra-Party divisions, debates, and conflicts. They fixate on Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, or North Vietnam) President Ho Chi Minh, who died six years before the war actually ended, and General Vo Nguyen Giap, who was not part of the ruling clique and played a peripheral role through it all. Fredrik Logevall's Pulitzer-winning book on the Indochina War and the roots of U.S. intervention and Max Hastings' latest book on the Vietnam War are telling examples of this.³⁵ Immensely popular with western audiences, these works offer little or no new insights on America's opponents despite claiming to do just that. While Logevall repeats the old notion that Ho was a misunderstood nationalist, Hastings promotes the even more archaic view of Ho and other Communist leaders as bloodthirsty maniacs.

The popularity of such works and their consequent historiographical preeminence are partly to blame for the fact that college-level courses on the war remain heavily accented on the American experience. It shocks and stupefies me to see instructors devote the same amount of time to the entirety of Vietnamese history before the coming of the Americans as they do to representations of the war in American film. I love *Apocalypse Now*, *Deer Hunter*, and *Platoon*. But do I think students should learn as much about these movies as they do about Vietnam before 1954? Absolutely not. American navel-gazing knows no end, apparently. The Vietnam War had a profound impact on American society and culture, to be sure, but its impact has been exponentially greater – and far more devastating – for Vietnam and the Vietnamese. American students should have a much better sense of this, especially today. Instead of the Vietnam War in American literature, why

³³ The American experience is covered comprehensively in such texts as George Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 6th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2019) and John Prados, *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009).

³⁴ See Keith W. Taylor, *A History of the Vietnamese* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³⁵ Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam* (New York: Random House, 2014); Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975* (New York: Harper, 2018).

not address the so-called Boat People in greater depth? And why not replace the week spent on the Vietnam-era music scene with lectures and readings on the war's legacies in Vietnam? Vietnamese lives matter, too.

My book aims to encourage a long-overdue reassessment of the way we think about and teach the war in the West and in the United States in particular. In this sense, it is as much a history of the war as it is a rebuke to standard interpretations of it. It forces readers to, first, recognize that the United States was not the sole active agent in the war and, second, think more seriously about Hanoi and the impact of its policies on the final outcome (as I noted in the introduction to the book, I leave it to others to write the story of Saigon and the South Vietnamese and call much-needed attention to them). Obviously, the United States played a meaningful role in creating the circumstances that produced the war, just as it committed grievous mistakes that cost it and its local allies dearly in the end. But if we are ever to make sense of the war as a defining moment in the Cold War, and not as mere chapter in American history, we must expand the lens through which we view, study, and think about it.

As it turns out, Communist policymakers and their armies did many things right to win the conflict. And that is the story this book tells. I decided to delve farther back into the Vietnamese past because standard accounts often do so, but poorly. Some of the topics I engaged I knew less or little about, which accounts for certain of the shortcomings pointed out by the reviewers. But I also had to simplify some aspects because this fundamentally is a book about the Vietnam War and not a history of the Vietnamese. I had to weight how much I would share about the Vietnamese against what was pertinent to the war itself. Taylor, a pillar among 'first-generation' Vietnam scholars, is right to point out that it is not appropriate to speak of the "Vietnamese people" before the tenth century. However, I would digress from my core purpose and overwhelm my reader if I expounded upon this. Similarly, my thesis about civil wars in Vietnamese history could have been fleshed out better and, among other points, acknowledged further instances of internecine conflict beyond those I relate. But my aim here was to throw light on a popular myth about the Vietnamese while calling attention to an important reality either ignored or glossed over by historians. The myth is that the Vietnamese formed a cohesive nation centuries ago, allowing them to precociously develop a keen sense of nationalism and the willingness to sacrifice for their country. The reality is that the war that unfolded in Vietnam after 1954 was, essentially, a civil war upon which the American War was momentarily juxtaposed, and civil war was nothing new for the Vietnamese. All else was detail I felt would break the flow of the narrative.

The latter point about internecine conflict in Vietnam is important to get past the notion that Ho Chi Minh personified Vietnamese nationalism. Ho embodied one narrow interpretation of that nationalism. He was, first and foremost, a committed Marxist-Leninist. And just as Communists were often at odds with each other, Ho faced detractors within his own party. Taylor faults me for romanticizing Ho, for claiming he was a reluctant agent of the Comintern and a nationalist more than a Communist. Those are not my claims; they were those of Ho's hardline comrades within the Party. Relative to his Stalinist peers, Ho was definitely a 'softie' and his agenda was more nationalist. But he was no reluctant Comintern agent. As an ideology, Marxism-Leninism was subject to interpretation by its adherents. Ho's interpretation was at variance with that of other Vietnamese Communists. But that still made him a Communist, and a committed one at that. His spat with Le Duan, which I have addressed at length elsewhere and recapitulated in this book, was acerbic precisely because it was between two adherents to the same belief system.³⁶ They just happened to disagree on what interpretation of Marxism-Leninism was the correct one, and what actions were appropriate to meet revolutionary objectives. Relative to Le Duan, Ho sure seemed bourgeois. That is a testament not to Ho's nationalist proclivities but to Le Duan's ardent dogmatism.

Taylor feels I am myself guilty of repeating an old myth about the war, namely, that of U.S. defeat. The United States, Taylor asserts, did not lose the war; it just abandoned it. I disagree with that interpretation. Wars do not get waged for their own sake; they are means to an end. That is, their progenitors intend them to serve particular political, diplomatic, economic, or other objectives. The Johnson administration intervened militarily in Vietnam in 1965 to assist in the preservation of the Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) as a non-Communist political entity. Despite availing themselves well militarily, American armed forces failed to fulfill that mission. Hanoi reunified Vietnam under the

³⁶ Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

Communist aegis. Accordingly, the United States suffered defeat. The Vietnam War was always more than a mere military contest; it was a political and diplomatic one as well, as I demonstrate in the book. American policymakers at the time failed to understand this, as have many scholars since.

Taylor suggests that I must have the omniscience of God to write that the outcome of the war was “inevitable” (250). He takes my claim of inevitability out of context. My point, as the sentence that follows in the book indicates, is that the fall of Saigon to Communist armies was imminent before the United States intervened directly in 1965. In fact, it was the very imminence of that prospect that prompted the intervention. Thus, *in retrospect and given its failure*, American military intervention delayed what appeared inevitable to everyone, including Washington decision-makers, at the time. The outcome of the American War itself was certainly not inevitable.

Ed Miller, one of the most knowledgeable ‘second-generation’ Vietnam scholars, considers my decision to limit the number of citations as “unorthodox.” The choice was a conscious one, for three reasons. First, as this work is intended for the general reader and the classroom, I felt orthodoxy warranted few citations. Second, I relied on classified Vietnamese documents discovered inadvertently, shall I say, while mining certain repositories and could not cite them without running the risk of getting myself or others in trouble. Perhaps I should have left such findings out but I thought they were too interesting, too ‘juicy,’ to omit from this type of book. Last, some of my claims are predicated on ‘insider knowledge,’ that is, information I learned over the past twenty-five years through informal but reliable Vietnamese channels including colleagues, students, archivists, veterans, and former ranking members of the Party and government. As of now, the archives of the Party, Ministry of Defense, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and Ministry of the Interior remain inaccessible to scholars, foreign as well as Vietnamese. The files of other ministries and governmental organs are accessible through National Archives Center 3 (*Trung tam lưu tru quoc gia 3*) in Hanoi, but those are always closely vetted before they are shared with the researcher who requested them.³⁷ Consequently, historians of the post-1945 Communist regime in Hanoi are often left without a ‘smoking gun’ to shed light on certain key issues such as the 1967 death of hardliner General Nguyen Chi Thanh or the deliberate underreporting of Vietnamese casualties during the war. But such is reality for those of us trying to make sense of and conducting research in a one-Party authoritarian state which – in its infinite paranoia – jealously guards and censors access to information. Historians will have to make do with the information we have at hand as long as the current regime retains power. This book afforded me the opportunity to share, without attribution as monographs dictate, “open secrets” – as my Vietnamese colleagues like to call them – about the war that the Party itself does not want disclosed.

Miller takes exception to my focus on Le Duan and esteem for the “‘great man theory’ of history.” I find the criticism somewhat ironic given his 2013 monograph centered on the life and accomplishments of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem.³⁸ Be that as it may, my focus on Le Duan was also a conscious choice intended to impress upon readers that, contrary to decades-old assumptions recycled in countless works, Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap did not play critical roles during the American War. Challenging such a deeply entrenched consensus, I felt, warranted an exaggerated focus on Le Duan. That focus dispels another popular – and racialized – myth, namely, that America’s enemies won because the war was fought in their country and they were prepared to defend it to the death. Attributing the outcome of the war to some innate resistance spirit among Vietnamese is highly problematic because it suggests that fighting was an organic act on their part, on the one hand, and that those who assisted the Americans in combatting Communist armies were not ‘real’ Vietnamese, on the other. My focus on Le Duan demonstrates that Communist troops, and those from the North in

³⁷ For more on the archive situation in Vietnam see Pierre Asselin, “Le Thanh Nghi’s Tour of the Socialist Bloc, 1965: Vietnamese Evidence on Hanoi’s Foreign Relations and the Onset of the American War,” CWIHP eDossier No. 77, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/publication/le-thanh-nghis-tour-the-socialist-bloc-1965>.

³⁸ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

particular, fought not because of some unique genetic trait but because they were ordered by their superiors to do so, just as American soldiers and Marines were doing at the time.

Miller notes that my depiction of Le Duan and other leaders could be more convincing, that I should have provided more information on their background as well as strategic thinking and decision-making. Again, a book such as the one I set out to write does not lend itself to such in-depth analysis, I believe. Besides, materials about the Party's inner workings, including internal debates and policy-making, are sparse for certain issues and periods owing to circumstances related above. Vietnamese documents highlighting Le Duan's role are particularly hard to locate. Ho Chi Minh remains the central – and only – hero in the official public narrative about the American War. The Party continues to nurture assiduously the cult of his personality through various means, including promotion of a syncretic ideology, a unique variant of Marxism-Leninism adapted to Vietnamese circumstances, known as Ho Chi Minh Thought. Taught in schools at all levels and peddled *ad nauseum* in other circles, Ho Chi Minh Thought and the official narrative on Ho serve as critical sources of Party legitimacy. They make no allowances for the meaningful roles played by Le Duan and others in the period 1954-75. When they are mentioned in official histories, these ranking Communists are characterized as loyal, obedient disciples who were unreservedly committed to the realization of “Uncle” Ho's vision. There are no hints at intra-Party tensions or dissidence, just as there are no hints at the fact that some of the Party's wartime policies, such as the decision to proceed with the 1968 Tet Offensive, proved abject failures. Evidence from the Party's own archives indicating that Ho was not the sole vector of power in Hanoi before his death in 1969, that Communist decision-making was contentious, or that Le Duan assumed as Party Secretary a prominent role in all this would expose the narrative as the fallacy that it is and, by extension, cripple the Party's already shaky standing with the Vietnamese masses. While such constraints are as deplorable as they are frustrating, they are par for the course when researching the past of an authoritarian state, as previously noted. Taylor is absolutely right: this book and my previous one – and the work of Lien-Hang Nguyen, I believe – beg for a biography of Le Duan.³⁹ In the absence of sufficient documentary evidence from Vietnam, however, that may be an impossible task.

Last, Miller feels that I do not “do nearly enough to explain the actual content of the Vietnamese Workers' Party version of ‘patriotic internationalism.’” He then goes on to write that great revolutions of the past 250 years have all been invariably nationalist and internationalist. This leads to a misinterpretation and mischaracterization of my argument. I use the term “patriotic internationalism” in reference to not the worldview, loosely defined, of Vietnamese Communist leaders but to the variant or ‘brand’ of Marxism-Leninism underpinning their actions and policies. As I stress in the book, Le Duan and his comrades were committed Communists. But in the context of the Sino-Soviet dispute and other fissures in the socialist camp, that term means little. Followers of Marxism-Leninism, like those of other creeds, interpreted the same ideology in vastly different, even contrasting, ways. My book seeks to shed light on this important matter. The American Revolution may well have been an internationalist project, but it was certainly not intended to serve as harbinger for the demise of capitalism and a new world order predicated on a fair redistribution of resources and classlessness. Perhaps the terms “patriotic internationalist Marxism-Leninism” would have preempted Miller's criticism. Miller also faults me for writing too little about what Stalinism, Maoism, and “other categories associated with the history of twentieth-century communism” meant to Vietnamese communist leaders. Valuable as it would be, such information does not belong in this type of book.

Andrew Gawthorpe, a historian of American foreign relations, underscores in his review the very lacunae in his field that prompted me to write this book.⁴⁰ As he suggests, most works on the Vietnam War are written by historians who neglect or otherwise ignore entirely the North Vietnamese home front and give the impression that northerners were automatons who were “fanatically devoted to their country's reunification whatever the personal cost.” Despite the passage of time, accounts

³⁹ Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*; Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁴⁰ Andrew J. Gawthorpe, *To Build as Well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

of the war continue to dwell on the American experience and pay little or no heed to those who suffered most, the Vietnamese themselves. That is unfortunate and unpardonable, as noted above.

I appreciate that Gawthorpe recognizes that my statement about inevitability, which Taylor flags, was never intended to mean that the outcome of the war was predetermined. This was about contingency, not determinism. As I iterated above, I chose the term to impress upon the reader that the outcome of the war owed less to American shortcomings, as so many books about the war and/or its lessons have argued, than to Le Duan's commitment to victory and willingness to sacrifice hundreds of thousands of his own compatriots to achieve it.

Again, I am extremely grateful to Gawthorpe, Miller, and Taylor for not only taking the time to produce thoughtful reviews but also offering valid insights and criticisms. My thanks, too, to Tom Maddux for commissioning the roundtable and David L. Anderson for writing the introduction. This will serve me well as I prepare a second edition to be published in the next two years, *Insha'Allah* – and should Cambridge University Press be willing, too!