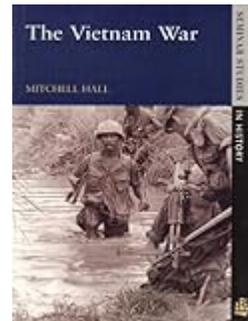


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Mitchell Hall. *The Vietnam War.* New York: Longman, 2000. xii + 136pp. \$12.66 (paper), ISBN 978-0-582-32859-4.



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Although it has been over twenty-five years since the fall of Saigon, interest in the Vietnam War remains high among scholars, college students, and the general public. In recent years, historians have devoted more attention to the international, domestic political, and Vietnamese facets of the conflict, both broadening and deepening our understanding. On university campuses across the country, courses on the war and its effects on military, diplomatic, political, and social developments in the United States – both during and after the conflict – consistently draw a large number of undergraduates seeking to understand the war in which their parents fought or against which they protested. And public fascination with “America’s longest war” lingers as the generation which fought in and against the war has inherited the mantle of leadership from the “greatest generation” of World War II.

The immense body of literature on the Vietnam War, however, makes writing a synthesis of current scholarship a challenging and daunting task to say the least. Much of the best work being done on the conflict, rather than examining the war in its entirety, focuses on specific events or periods during the twenty-five year American involvement in Southeast Asia. For example, historians such as Fred Logevall, David Kaiser, and Ed Moise have made substantial contributions to our understand-

ing of the development of the conflict in the early years of the fighting.[1] Yet these works, while important contributions to the academic literature, assume a certain basic knowledge of the war. The on-going publication of monographs, polemics, and articles on the war also makes it difficult for those with little or no background about the Vietnam conflict to know where to begin. Mitchell Hall’s new textbook strives to fill the need for an essential primer on the conflict. Part of the *Seminar Studies in History* series, which is published with the intent to “provide a means of bridging the gap between specialist articles and monographs and textbooks,” *The Vietnam War* provides the reader with a concise introduction to the roots, evolution, and denouement of the conflict.

The book is organized into three sections. The first traces the background of the Second Indochina War, examining the roots of Vietnamese nationalism, the French colonial period, the division of Vietnam at Geneva, and the initial steps of American involvement under Eisenhower and Kennedy in support of the South Vietnamese regime of Ngo Dinh Diem. Given how quickly Hall moves through this material, it is virtually impossible for the uninitiated reader to understand the complexities of Vietnamese history prior to 1964. Yet Hall manages to provide enough of an overview to give the novice student a general sense of the strong desire for independence that

fueled Ho Chi Minhs movement for over five decades.

Professor Hall calls part two of the book “Descriptive Analysis,” although he provides more of the former than the latter. Sketching the evolution of the American commitment from 1964 through the Paris Peace Accords in 1973, the fall of Saigon in 1975, and the legacies of the war, the author moves rapidly through familiar events. At the end of this section, he briefly discusses the post-war scholarship on the conflict, giving the reader a variety of secondary sources to consult for more detailed analysis of the war. The organization of this section of the book, however, could be somewhat distracting and confusing to students unfamiliar with the basic narrative and chronology of the war. For example, Hall discusses military actions undertaken by the United States from 1965 to 1967 and then returns to 1965 and the growth of the antiwar movement (see pp. 25-37, 42). While a thematic approach has its merits, it may not be the best way to present the story of the war to those with little background knowledge.

The final section of the book is perhaps the most useful in pedagogical terms. Hall has compiled excerpts of twenty-three primary documents and secondary sources in an effort to give the reader an opportunity to analyze for himself the history of the war. The first three selections are examples of orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist views on the war from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., William Westmoreland, and George Herring, respectively. The rest of the excerpts range from the Tonkin Gulf resolution, North and South Vietnamese documents, presidential speeches, and CIA assessments of the situation in Vietnam. Although all of the documents are taken from the post-1964 period, Hall provides the reader and the instructor with a wealth of topics for classroom discussion and to encourage further research. This section of the book also contains a fairly detailed chronology of the conflict dating from the formation of the Vietminh in 1945 through the fall of Saigon, a guide to the main

American and Vietnamese participants, a useful glossary of terms, and a bibliography. One would have hoped that the author would have chosen an annotated bibliography similar in style, if not scope, to the more useful one found in George Herring’s *Americas Longest War*, but this is a minor quibble.

While focusing primarily on the United States and its role in the war, *The Vietnam War* also includes North and South Vietnamese perspectives and positions the conflict within its larger global context. Hall gives the reader a broad, synthetic overview of the wars impact in Vietnam and the United States while discussing diplomatic decisions, the antiwar movement, military strategy, politics, and public opinion. Although he tends to emphasize military actions and underplays the importance of the domestic political considerations that fundamentally influenced the decisions of Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon, the author’s efforts to strike a balance between the multiple facets of the conflict are generally successful. Indeed, Hall does a particularly good job of giving the reader a sample of these varying perspectives on the conflict without overwhelming new students of the conflict.

Overall, while not a significant contribution to the canon of literature per se, *The Vietnam War* is a useful introduction to the conflict in keeping with the mandate of the Seminar Studies in History series. While it will not have as much utility to scholars or even advanced undergraduates as Herring’s standard survey or A.J. Langguth’s new book, *Our Vietnam/Nuoc Viet Ta: A History of the War, 1954-1975*, Halls brief volume will be a solid addition to lower-division American history survey courses as an overview of the conflict and has value as a pedagogical resource in the classroom.

Note

[1]. See for example Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War*; David Kaiser, *An American Tragedy*; and Edwin Moise, *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*.

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