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Marc Jason Gilbert, ed. *Why the North Won the Vietnam War.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002. xiv + 254 pp. $31.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-312-29527-1; $97.13 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-29526-4.

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New Perspectives on Why the United States Failed in Vietnam

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This is a very useful volume to help one think about the reasons behind the "Northern" (or communist) victory in the Vietnam War, but not quite in the way its title suggests. While offering a good deal of fresh thinking about the war, most of the essays here do this in traditional ways, from a U.S. perspective.

The work collected by Gilbert is the product of a conference held at Gettysburg College in October 2000, which was partially inspired by an earlier conference there on "Why the North Won the Civil War." In both cases, conference organizers made reference to Confederate General George Pickett's observation, when reacting to former Confederates' obsessions with their own failures: "Gentlemen, Ah think the Yankees kind of had something to do with it." The confrence organizers encouraged participants to think, like Pickett, "outside of the box."

If the contributions had truly been designed in the spirit of the Confederate general's words, the bulk of the work presented here should have been on what the *Vietnamese*, especially those opposed to the United States and its allies in Saigon, believed and did between 1960 and 1975. The traditional, historiographical box, after all, is a gathering place for those investigating the war primarily from a U.S. perspective, relying mostly on English-language sources. However, only two of the eight essays (not counting Lloyd Gardner's summing up) view events primarily from a Vietnamese perspective and rely largely on non-U.S. sources. It is still difficult to examine political, military, economic, cultural, and other aspects of the war from non-U.S. perspectives, but recent work by scholars such as Mark Bradley, Qiang Zhai, Chen Jian, Ilya Gaiduk, Stephen Morris, and Philip Catton (as well as contributors William Duiker and Robert Brigham) shows that it can be done and that we can learn much from it.

All of this is not to say that this volume does not advance our knowledge of and thinking about the war. Especially those who teach the Vietnam War will find in virtually every essay a quick guide to the latest literature as well as, and most importantly, interesting new ways to ask questions and to suggest answers to many persisting

questions.

The opening essay by the editor provides a useful discussion of important historiographical debates of the question as to why the United States failed to reach its objectives. It is particularly good in emphasizing the complexities involved with formulating questions and in showing how the changing U.S. political climate since the 1960s has shaped this process.

Later in the book, Gilbert also has an essay that re-examines, in detail, one of the more prominent of these debates, the so-called Summers-Colby debate between proponents of two alternative approaches to General Westmoreland's strategy of attrition. Through an examination of American pacification efforts in 1965, Gilbert concludes that the decision to escalate the war at that time ignored abundant evidence from the field concerning the political nature of the conflict (thereby disposing of the Summers alternative). It also shows, however, that the pacification effort (the Colby alternative) faced insurmountable problems in a whole range of weaknesses on the side of the indispensible partner, the South Vietnamese state.

Two senior scholars, William Duiker and George Herring, address the international dimensions of the conflict, with the former giving a fine overview of the diplomacy of Ho Chi Minh and his colleagues from 1945 to 1975. Duiker shows that while not free of mistakes and miscalculations, Ho's international strategy was a key factor in the communist victory, as it managed to maintain the support of key allies–China and the Soviet Union–who were often anxious not to antagonize the United States needlessly and who developed a fierce rivalry among themselves during the 1960s. In an essay equally rich and persuasive, Herring shows how the lack of support from its allies and friends around the world limited Washington's freedom of action and how "a war fought to maintain the American empire exposed and exacerbated its fundamental economic, diplomatic, and military weaknesses" (p. 92).

Robert Brigham's contribution relies, like Duiker's, to a significant degree on Vietnamese language sources. He makes the case that on the communist side, the influence of Southerners was decisive on the decisions in 1959/1960 to shift to a military approach for national unification and that Southerners also largely determined the way the communists fought the war. It is an intriguing and plausible thesis, but Brigham's essay does not clinch the case, because in the end it is primarily the tale of the rising influence of Le Duan and General Nguyen Chi Than. The essay demonstrates clearly that these two revolutionaries played key roles; however, it ignores many other questions about the decisionmaking process on the side of Hanoi and the National Liberation Front (NLF).

Jeffrey Record provides an excellent discussion of the flawed performance of the U.S. military within the limits set by the country's civilian leadership. His expos= of hubris, incompetence, interservice rivalries, and careerism should disabuse any serious reader of the notion that the military would have been able to achieve U.S. objectives in Vietnam, had it not been for interference by these civilians.

John Prados has written a similar tale on United States intelligence efforts, in the sense that he shows that a massive American effort, relying on the use of the latest technology, did not necessarily improve performance in Vietnam. Although he does not use the currently popular phrase, Prados's argument suggests that the American effort was lacking in the area of "human intelligence" and that it was here that the NLF had a crucial edge.

As do Record's and Prados's contributions, the essay by Andrew Rotter underscores the realization that U.S. resources and thinking were unsuited to deal with the situation in Vietnam. Rotter argues that U.S. "economic culture," especially a determination to reduce aspects of reality to manageable statistics, prevented Americans from understanding that reality. It is an intriguing, though not entirely new, perspective and Rotter makes a persuasive argument for the American side. However, the few paragraphs he devotes to the "economic culture" of the North Vietnamese are less compelling, in part because of their uncritical nature. It is true that America's opponents outperformed and, especially, out-strategized their enemy, but that does not mean Hanoi did not make mistakes (or worse) in its efforts to keep its population committed to the war, as the work by David Chanoff has made abundantly clear.

In the final essay, Marilyn Young examines concrete ways in which the anti-war movement influenced the course of the war. The movement reminded U.S. leaders, she argues, that there was a political price to be paid at home (and overseas, among the armed forces) for policies many Americans deemed wrong. Young insists that the anti-war movement was part of society, instead of operating outside it, which is an important explanation for its influence. Together with Herring's essay "Fighting without Allies," Young's contribution also raises questions about America's present-day predicament: as in the 1960s, the U.S government pursues a foreign policy that

is controversial both abroad and at home. The challenge today is very different, and on the whole more imminent than in Vietnam, but the question remains: Can the U.S. government and those who support it sustain a policy that generates widespread opposition among those whom it is designed to benefit? It is still early in this new game, but the record from the Vietnam era is not encouraging.

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