

Vietnam War (1960 – 75): Changing Interpretations

Interpretations of the Vietnam War have departed significantly from typical patterns both during and after most of America's previous wars. Instead of reflecting, defending, and bolstering official accounts of the war, as occurred with World Wars I and II, early historical assessments of the [Vietnam conflict](#) were for the most part highly critical of U.S. policy. The most widely read works on the Vietnam War during the late 1960s and early 1970s—including those of journalists [Bernard Fall](#), Robert Shaplen, and David Halberstam, and historians Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., and George McT. Kahin and John W. Lewis—indicted government policy, often quite harshly. Those works presented a radically different version of the war's origins, purpose, and [efficacy](#) than that offered by Washington [officialdom](#). Only in the late 1970s, following North Vietnam's military triumph and the extended soul-searching it occasioned throughout the United States, did a [revisionist](#) school of thought emerge. Ironically, the [Vietnam](#) revisionists mounted a belated defense of the American war effort, venting much of their anger at the prevailing liberal orthodoxy, which, they insisted, wrongly considered the Indochina war to be unwinnable or—even more egregious from their perspective—immoral.

Despite the broad agreement among early writers that the Vietnam War represented a colossal mistake for the United States, and that American policy was plagued persistently by errors, blunders, misperceptions, and miscalculations, significant interpretive differences still existed within that literature. In their influential book, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked* (1979), Leslie H. Gelb and Richard K. Betts identified no less than nine distinct explanations advanced by experts during the 1960s and 1970s for America's failed intervention in Vietnam. They ranged from economic imperialism to idealistic imperialism, from bureaucratic politics to domestic politics, and from misperceptions and [ethnocentrism](#) to ideological blinders and the imperatives of international power politics. Analysts disagreed from the first, then, not just about the reasons for the U.S. failure in Vietnam, but about the relative weight of the factors that precipitated and sustained the American commitment.

Two sharply differentiated views emerged in that first wave of scholarship about the Vietnam War, views that continue to be echoed in today's debates. The first characterizes American involvement in the war as an avoidable tragedy. American policymakers, according to this liberal realist perspective, foolishly exaggerated

Vietnam's importance to the United States. Had they more soberly assessed its true value to the economic and security interests of the United States, recognized the popular appeal of revolutionary [nationalism](#) within the country, and appreciated the limits of American power, then the ensuing tragedy might well have been averted.

That view remains the dominant interpretation of the Vietnam War. Most books and articles about American involvement, for all the different emphases that naturally distinguish the work of individual authors, fall within its wide boundaries. Major overviews of the war by such experts as George C. Herring, Stanley Karnow, Gary R. Hess, George McT. Kahin, William S. Turley, Neal Sheehan, and William J. Duiker take as a basic point of departure the notion that the Vietnam conflict was a tragic misadventure that could have been avoided had American leaders only been wiser, more prudent, and less wedded to the assumptions of the past. The former defense secretary [Robert S. McNamara](#)'s memoir, *In Retrospect* (1995), also falls within this interpretive school.

The other major interpretive approach offers a far more radical critique of American intentions and behavior. It depicts the United States as a global [hegemony](#), concerned primarily with its own economic expansion, and reflexively opposed to communism, indigenous revolution, or any other challenge to its authority. Authors writing from this perspective typically characterize American intervention in Indochina as the necessary and logical consequence of a rapacious superpower's drive for world dominance. Although scholarly and polemical treatments of the war have been written in this vein since the late 1960s, [Gabriel Kolko](#)'s seminal *Anatomy of a War* represents the most sophisticated and comprehensive formulation of the radical perspective. Kolko sees U.S. intervention in Vietnam as a predictable consequence of the American ruling class's determination to exert control over the world capitalist system. The U.S. political economy's need for raw materials, investment outlets, and the integration between capitalist core states and the developing regions of the periphery set Washington on a collision course with revolutionary nationalist currents throughout the Third World.

By the early 1980s, a conservative revisionism had emerged that, at least temporarily, shifted the terms of a debate that up to then had largely pitted liberal realists against radical neo-Marxists. The Vietnam revisionist perspective was spearheaded by three former U.S. Army officers, Harry G. Summers, Jr., Bruce Palmer, Jr., and Philip B.

Davidson, all veterans of the war. In separate books, each vehemently criticized U.S. policy. Summers, Palmer, and Davidson asserted that military and civilian leaders failed to develop realistic plans for achieving American politico-military objectives in Vietnam, failed to assess accurately the capabilities and intentions of their adversaries, and failed to coordinate specific battlefield tactics with an overall strategy for securing [victory](#). The conservative critique of America's Vietnam policy scored points with academic and nonacademic audiences alike, while calling attention to fundamental shortcomings in the American approach to warfare in [Southeast Asia](#). Another group of conservative revisionists also emerged during the 1980s. This group, which included such diverse authorities as R. B. Smith, Larry Cable, Andrew Krepinevich, Walt W. Rostow, and William Colby, insisted that real benefits accrued to the non-Communist nations of Southeast Asia as a result of U.S. intervention, and argued that the “pacification” campaign pursued by the United States could have succeeded.

For all the attention accorded it by the media and by politicians, the conservative revisionist wave has not fundamentally altered our understanding of the Vietnam War. The revisionists may, ironically, have bolstered the central premises of the liberal realists more than they have overturned them. The chief faultline in the literature continues to lie between the liberal realists, on the one hand, and their left radical critics on the other—much as it has for the past three decades. That faultline will not soon be closed since the core issues at stake concern matters much broader than the mere origins and outcome of a war. They encompass as well such fundamental questions as the purpose of American foreign relations, the nature of American society, and the meaning of the American historical experience. That is why, perhaps, debates about the Vietnam conflict remain as hotly contested years after the war's end as they were at the height of U.S. involvement in the late 1960s.