

## Vietnam

### *The Vietnam War: A documentary reader*

Edited by EDWARD MILLER

Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016. Pp. 296. Images, Notes, Index.

doi:10.1017/S0022463417000479

Ed Miller may well have composed *the Vietnam War* companion reader for college students. Few scholars are better qualified than he is to write such a book. His mastery of the Vietnamese language and extensive work in both American and Vietnamese archives resulted in path-breaking studies on the Ngo Dinh Diem regime. Miller's expertise is fully displayed in *The Vietnam War: A documentary reader*, a fascinating collection of primary sources interspersed with remarkably insightful commentaries by the editor. Unlike other documentary readers, Miller's book includes a large and diverse array of never-before-seen Vietnamese materials in English translation. And these are not just any Vietnamese materials; they are key pieces of evidence shedding important new light on critical aspects of the war drawn from Vietnamese archives and personal memoirs. Arguably the book's greatest strength — and the reason instructors should assign it to their students above others — is its balanced treatment of the two sides and of the various Vietnamese and American parties to the war. The Vietnamese come to life in Miller's book, becoming the agents, movers and shakers of their own history, which they have always been, although Western scholars have largely failed to acknowledge this. 'The documents presented in this volume have been selected to provide readers with multiple perspectives on the complex history of the Vietnam War,' Miller writes (p. xxix); and they do just that.

The introduction to the book is one of the most comprehensive and astute summations of Vietnam's history I have read. It is invaluable for putting the Vietnam War in its proper context. Challenging the traditional notion of Vietnamese nationalist determinism, Miller explains that the country's history and politics were defined 'less by any external rivalry with China' and other external powers 'than by the fierce internal competitions among Vietnamese elites'. Nationalism as a 'mass phenomenon in Vietnam', he writes, came only in the wake of the French conquest in the nineteenth century (p. xvi). Miller also adroitly explains the origins of the insurgency in the South that culminated in American military intervention in Spring 1965. It was 'fueled by popular anger with official corruption and Diem's indiscriminate security measures' as much as it was 'driven by the actions of communist party cadres' (p. xxi). American intervention did not take place in a vacuum, he tells us, and was not entirely unprovoked.

The documents themselves were meticulously selected. Each is preceded by a brief explanation of its contents and significance. They are integrated into thoughtfully organised sections concluding with a list of discussion questions. Individual sections cover French colonialism and the emergence of Vietnamese nationalism and communism; the Indochina War and the roots of American involvement; the interwar period, including the rise of the Viet Cong and the fall of the Diem regime; the American War in Vietnam and its myriad dimensions, including 'home fronts'; and memories and legacies of the war. While the attention given to the Vietnamese

side of the story is this book's greatest asset, the story of the Americans is no less engaging and revealing. Miller must be commended for locating and presenting fresh US documentary evidence that effectively relates the confusing and divisive nature of the war for Washington policy-makers, those who fought in it, and the American public. As he does for the Vietnamese, Miller offers a balanced mix of sources relating the thinking and sentiments of the key political actors, on the one hand, and the experiences of those impacted by their decisions, namely, armed forces personnel, on the other.

There are a few lacunae in this book. Miller could have provided better insights into high-level communist and South Vietnamese decision-making during the war. Also, it would have been a good idea to include either an annotated bibliography or, at a minimum, a comprehensive list of suggested readings as they usually are of great use to students. Most disappointing is the absence of maps, an inexcusable oversight by the publisher for a book of this kind.

Ultimately, Miller's book achieves what it sets out to do: offer a sound and effective overview of the multiple perspectives and complexities of the Vietnam War. It should be assigned reading in all college-level courses on that conflict, and on the shelves of every public and university library. This is a remarkable contribution to the constantly expanding body of works on the most consequential and controversial armed conflict of the post-1945 era in world history.

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*Voices from the Second Republic of South Vietnam (1967–1975)*

Edited by K.W. TAYLOR

Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2015. Pp. 180. Maps, Illustrations, Tables, Notes, Contributors.

doi:10.1017/S0022463417000480

Four decades have passed since the end of the Vietnam War, but recently scholars of Vietnam have published many new books redefining the Vietnam War as a 'Vietnamese War'. However, two gaps remain. First, new scholarship on South Vietnam has focused on the First Republic period (1955–1963), which excludes a consideration of Vietnamese experiences in the south at the height of American involvement. American narratives frequently exclude political developments of Vietnam in 1967, including the promulgation of a new constitution and the successful elections leading to Vietnam's Second Republic. Second, few English-language Vietnamese memoirs are available for this later period. Although several Second Republic officials have written books, many of these are difficult to find, dated, or self-serving.

Taylor's volume provides an in-depth look at the diplomatic, political, military, economic, and even agricultural workings of the Second Republic from the point of view of the civil servants dedicated to making South Vietnam thrive despite continuous challenges. *Voices of the Second Republic* features recollections of civil servants.