

# 2008

The logo for h-diplo, featuring the text 'h-diplo' in a stylized, lowercase, cursive font.

## H-Diplo Roundtable Reviews

[www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables](http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables)

Volume IX, No. 12 (2008)

9 June 2008

**Edwin A. Martini.** *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000.* University of Massachusetts Press, October 2007. \$24.95 (paperback), ISBN: 978-1-55849-609-5. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN: 978-1-55849-608-8.

Roundtable Editor: Thomas Maddux

Reviewers: Michael Allen, Robert Brigham, Matthew Masur, James McAllister

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/~diplo/roundtables/PDF/InvisibleEnemies-Roundtable.pdf>

## Contents

---

|   |    |
|---|----|
| Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge..... | 2  |
| Review by Michael J. Allen, North Carolina State University .....           | 6  |
| Review by Robert K. Brigham, Vassar College .....                           | 12 |
| Review by Matthew Masur, St. Anselm College .....                           | 16 |
| Review by James McAllister, Williams College .....                          | 19 |
| Author's Response by Ed Martini, Western Michigan University .....          | 23 |

---

## Copyright © 2008 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.

H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for non-profit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author(s), web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses, contact the H-Diplo editorial staff at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

Introduction by Thomas Maddux, California State University, Northridge

---

Edwin Martini concludes his study with a story about three flags that illustrates the impact of the Vietnam War on American cultural memory, “a reminder that the American war on Vietnam may never end, and that it will be remembered---and forgotten—in particular ways.” The first flag is the POW/MIA flag which Congress stipulated in 1997 that post offices and federal buildings must fly several times a year. The second flag is the Republic of Vietnam flag which a state delegate in Virginia in 2002 wanted to display at all public functions and state institutions. When the Socialist Republic of Vietnam protested, the Department of State successfully persuaded the state legislature to drop the bill. The third flag involves three flags flying outside the American majority-owned automobile factory in Hai Duong between Hanoi and the port city of Hai Phong. The first flag is the Socialist Republic of Vietnam flag; the second the U.S. flag; and the third the flag of the Ford Motor Company.

The three flags symbolize stages in the post-1975 relationship that Martini explores in a study that combines cultural studies with diplomacy. The prisoner of war/missing in action issue raised its emotional and political head by November 1975 and made a significant contribution to the reasons as to why U.S. leaders were unable and unwilling to normalize relations with the new united Vietnam until 1995. The second flag of the defeated Republic of Vietnam and the U.S. ally since 1954 points to the influx of Vietnamese refugees as well as Cambodians and Laotians after the collapse of all three U.S. allies in the spring of 1975. Martini admittedly does not devote much attention to Vietnamese-Americans, but they definitely were emotionally and politically involved in the issues after 1975. The third flag points to the changes initiated in the mid-1980s when Vietnam, with assistance from IMF advisers, shifted to a market-based economic program which brought increased interest from U.S. firms that wanted to participate in the opening of the Vietnam market. The U.S. trade embargo and opposition to any international assistance to Vietnam had severely handicapped U.S. firms and, as Martini points out, they aggressively lobbied to end the U.S. restrictions and non-recognition of the Vietnam government.

The reviewers welcome Martini’s study and his insights on the cultural dimension as well as his focus on Congressional hearings on Vietnam-related issues. They do express some reservations as indicated below, and Martini’s response indicates a willingness to consider their suggestions.

1. Martini’s title captures the two essential themes of his book. First, “the American War on Vietnam” after Hanoi’s seizure of South Vietnam, and, second, “invisible enemies,” the Vietnamese who don’t receive much favorable attention with respect to cultural representations on the war, most notably films, or consideration on issues such as the impact on the war on the Vietnamese people, their environment, and their much larger number of MIAs. By transposing Karl von Clausewitz’s famous dictum that war is the continuation of politics by other means to the thesis that politics is the continuation of war by other means, Martini makes a forceful case for viewing post-1975 U.S. policies as fitting this revised dictum. (10-11) Matthew

Masur and the other reviewers agree that Martini makes a persuasive case for both themes. In the context of the Cold War we are prepared for conflicts that persist long after the shooting stops. It is perhaps somewhat predictable that the Vietnamese would be villains or shadowy figures in the American films. Although I claim no expertise on war films, the treatment of Japanese in WWII films seems similar to how Vietnamese have been depicted in the films that Martini evaluates. We can hope that this will change sooner with the Vietnamese than it did with the Japanese with a portrayal of the quality that Clint Eastwood provided in "Letters from Iwo Jima" (2006), more than sixty years after Japan surrendered.

2. Robert Brigham and James McAllister note that Martini does not suggest that the postwar conflict was predetermined. Although Washington initiated immediate economic sanctions and a trade embargo and by November 1975 the POW/MIA issue had emerged, the new administration under President Carter began discussions in January 1977 to normalize relations with a mission to Hanoi led by Leonard Woodcock and negotiations in Paris by Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke with Vietnam's Foreign Minister Phan Hien. In both discussions Phan Hien insisted on U.S. aid based on the Paris Peace Accords and a letter from President Richard Nixon before normalization of relations. As Martini suggests, Vietnam had a good claim to aid but seriously "underestimated the level of aversion to Hanoi felt by many in Congress, and could have played their hand much better when confronted with such congressional animosity." (30-38) If Hanoi had recognized that their military seizure of South Vietnam overturned the Paris Peace Accords, they could have obtained normalization of relations with some prospects for trade and international assistance before the POW/MIA issue became a political lightning rod.
3. The relationship between culture and foreign policy is central to Martini's study and the reviewers raise the most questions on this issue. They agree with McAllister that Martini makes his study accessible and rewarding by avoiding the jargon-specific language of cultural studies and its theories. To integrate culture and diplomacy Martini offers a sequence of paired chapters with one on the origins of the postwar war on Vietnam linked with a chapter on cultural representations such as Hollywood films *Coming Home* (1978), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Apocalypse Now* (1979). In a second set of paired chapters, Martini explores the impact of the Vietnamese invasion of Cambodia and border conflict with China and the U.S. response with a chapter on the a second wave of films led by *Rambo* (1985), *Platoon* (1986), and Marvel Comics' *The 'Nam* which started in 1986 and ran until 1993. The reviewers agree that Martini confirms earlier studies that note how cultural representations ignore the Vietnamese and turn the Americans into victims of the conflict. Michael Allen, however, wants more demonstration that the images had the effects that Martini suggests they had. In the book and in his response, Martini emphasizes that the cultural representations and foreign policies reflect and "were driven by the same cultural logic." (48, and p. 5 in Martini's response).

4. The central challenge for Martini is whether or not his cultural logic, or cultural causality, is persuasive for understanding U.S. foreign policy or whether policy responds more to domestic political considerations and the impact of Cold War concerns. McAllister, for example, readily agrees that films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Rambo* had a dynamic impact in making the POW/MIA issue volatile and destructive to any move to normalization even if countless government studies starting in 1976 found no evidence that Americans were being held in Vietnam. However, McAllister asserts that U.S. policies on Vietnam after 1975 “look much less like a conscious decision to ‘wage war’ and much more as a messy result of intra-governmental rivalries, the application of standard operating procedures, election year politics, and the strong influence of domestic lobbies such as the POW/MIA lobby.” (3) Brigham puts more emphasis on politics, the strong policy differences between Carter’s Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and National Security Adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and the Cold War within which Washington choose normalization with China as opposed to the Soviet Union’s ally, Vietnam, and stayed with this strategic choice despite China’s attack on the northern border of Vietnam and China’s backing of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.
5. The reviewers praise Martini’s use of cultural sources and his analysis of Congressional hearings on Vietnam, but Masur questions the omission of Vietnamese Americans, and others note the absence of research in executive branch records during the period. Martini generously agrees with these comments. Historians of U.S. policy will look forward to further analysis of whether U.S. policymakers after 1975 were influenced by Martini’s cultural representations and responded to his cultural logic as well as domestic political and Cold War concerns.

### Participants:

**Edwin Martini** received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Maryland in 2004 and his B.A. in American Studies from Pitzer College in 1998. Ed is an assistant professor of history at Western Michigan University. He is currently the editor of the H-1960s listserv, and an article review editor at H-Diplo. His work has appeared in *The Journal of American History* and *Reviews in American History*, most notably “The Virtual Walls and the Widows of War Memorial,” *Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (December, 2000), 987-991; “Much More Than My Lai,” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (September, 2007), 432-439; “Being Henry Kissinger,” *Reviews in American History* Vol. 37, No. 1 (Forthcoming, March, 2008). Currently, he is at work on a book project entitled “Agent Orange: A History” (under contract with the University of Massachusetts Press for the “Culture, Politics, and the Cold War” series. The book explores the global histories and legacies of the use of chemical agents by the United States during the war in Vietnam. Martini also has a forthcoming article, “Bringing the War Home: Agent Orange As International History,” in *New World Coming: The Global Legacies of the 1960s*, edited by Robert Clarke in 2009.

**Michael J. Allen** is a cultural historian of war, politics, and foreign policy in twentieth-century America. An assistant professor at North Carolina State University, he received his

PhD from Northwestern University in 2003. His book *Until The Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Politics of Loss at the End of the Vietnam War* (University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming) examines the unprecedented level of concern expressed over imprisoned and missing Americans during and after the Vietnam War in order to interrogate the ways official and nonstate actors constructed and contested the meaning of American defeat in Vietnam, and to explore the political and diplomatic implications of their activism. His essay "'Help Us Tell the Truth About Vietnam': POW/MIA Politics and the End of the American War," *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, eds., (Oxford University Press, 2008) considers related themes in the context of the peace process that ended the war.

**Robert K. Brigham**, Shirley Ecker Boskey Professor of History and International Relations at Vassar College, earned his PhD with George Herring at the University of Kentucky. Brigham is author of several books on the Vietnam War, including the forthcoming *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power* (PublicAffairs, 2008). He is currently working on a biography of Ho Chi Minh.

**Matthew Masur** is Assistant Professor of History at St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. He earned his PhD from Ohio State University in 2004. His publications include "Falling Dominoes: The United States, Vietnam, and the War in Iraq" in John Dumbrell and David Ryan, eds. *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies, and Ghosts* (Routledge, 2006) and, with Edward Miller, "Saigon Revisited: Researching South Vietnam's Republican Era" for the Cold War International History Project. He is currently revising an article for publication in *Diplomatic History*.

**James McAllister** received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University in 1999 and is currently an Associate Professor of Political Science at Williams College. He is the author of *No Exit: America and the German Problem, 1943-1954* (2002) and articles on the Vietnam War that have been published in *Pacific Historical Review*, *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, and *Modern Asian Studies*. He is currently working on a book about American Ambassadors to South Vietnam during the Johnson Administration.

Review by Michael J. Allen, North Carolina State University

---

In November 2000 Bill Clinton became the first sitting U.S. president to visit Vietnam since Richard Nixon in 1969. As they covered Clinton's tour, reporters struggled to explain the warm welcome he received, knowing his trip was decidedly more controversial back home. Many noted with some surprise that over half of the Vietnamese population was born after American combat forces exited their country. Rarely, if ever, did this prompt a parallel observation about the United States, where over one-third of Americans were born after the war's official end, a demographic that has since grown to include nearly half of all Americans.

That such an obvious comparison was seldom made says much about the embattled place the Vietnam War still occupies in American life. While Americans could imagine that their former enemies no longer harbored ill will toward the United States, it was harder to let go of their own grievances. For the majority of Americans never sent to Indochina, the war still raged where it always had—on TV, at the movies, in bookstores, and on the National Mall, not

to mention on the hustings and in the halls of Congress—but the Vietnamese, never very visible to Americans even during the war, were increasingly displaced by domestic villains and victims. As a generation of scholars born too late to witness the war's fighting firsthand begins to write books, it is not surprising that a number have focused on the war they grew up with—the one that continued long after the shooting stopped. Edwin Martini's provocative new book on what he calls "the American War on Vietnam" after 1975 joins other recent works by young scholars in seeking to explain the cultural, political, and diplomatic residues of the Vietnam War, doing more than any study before it to conceptualize lingering postwar conflicts as a continuation of the war by other means.<sup>1</sup> For all its conceptual richness, however, its inattention to the full range of actors involved in those conflicts undermines its interpretive promise.

*Michael J. Allen is a cultural historian of war, politics, and foreign policy in twentieth-century America. An assistant professor at North Carolina State University, he received his PhD from Northwestern University in 2003. His book *Until The Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Politics of Loss at the End of the Vietnam War* (University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming) examines the unprecedented level of concern expressed over imprisoned and missing Americans during and after the Vietnam War in order to interrogate the ways official and nonstate actors constructed and contested the meaning of American defeat in Vietnam, and to explore the political and diplomatic implications of their activism. His essay "Help Us Tell the Truth About Vietnam": POW/MIA Politics and the End of the American War," *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars: Local, National, and Transnational Perspectives*, Mark Philip Bradley and Marilyn B. Young, eds., (Oxford University Press, 2008) considers related themes in the context of the peace process that ended the war.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Martini's book joins Thomas Hawley, *The Remains of War: Bodies, Politics, and the Search for American Soldiers Unaccounted for in Southeast Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005); Natasha Zaretsky, *No Direction Home: The American Family and the Fear of National Decline, 1968-1980* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007); and my own *Until The Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Politics of Loss at the End of the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming) as new first books by young scholars that investigate the war's legacy.

Proclaiming that “the time has arrived when the period after 1975 can no longer be ignored or dismissed as an ‘epilogue’ to American involvement in Vietnam,” Martini argues that U.S. foreign policy toward Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, and various forms of postwar cultural expression, “are difficult to distinguish from similar ‘wartime’ activities.” Those warlike activities, he asserts, warrant inclusion in the history of the Vietnam wars (5, 11). Beginning with the fall of Saigon and ending in the twenty-first century, Martini chronicles the post-1975 American war on Vietnam in six chapters. Chapters one, three, and five concern the “lengthy and bitter economic, political, and diplomatic war against the nation and people of Vietnam,” treating a range of familiar, if understudied, U.S. policies that isolated Vietnam on the world stage and crippled its economy (2). Chapters two, four, and six take up contemporaneous cultural representations that Martini believes contributed to those punitive policies “by rendering Vietnamese subjects silent or invisible” (2). Together, he maintains, these two “‘fronts’ of the American war on Vietnam combined to reconstruct the cultural, political, and economic work of American empire in the wake of a long, devastating, and divisive war” while doing untold harm to the Vietnamese people (2).

There is much here to unpack, but let me first commend Martini’s attempt to redraw the war’s chronological and conceptual boundaries. Embracing Jill Lepore’s contention that war is in part a contest of meaning, Martini inverts Karl von Clausewitz’s dictum that war is politics by other means to assert that politics can also be war by other means, particularly when pursued with the hostility Americans evinced toward Vietnam after 1975 (10).<sup>2</sup> The hazy line between war and peace, and the dynamic relationship between political and military struggle, was a defining feature of the Vietnam wars, the Cold War, and twentieth-century international relations generally, which is one reason historians seeking the origins of the American War in Vietnam have traced the roots of the conflict ever earlier into the colonial past, long before U.S. military intervention. Martini urges a similarly capacious view of war’s end, when the U.S. retained a far greater ability to influence events than defeated nations traditionally enjoy.

By calling into question the fall of Saigon in 1975 as the obvious and rightful end to the story, Martini makes room for the sizable literature on the war’s legacy in its vast and ever-growing historiography. Martini is not the first scholar to examine the post-1975 period—cultural studies scholars have covered much of this ground already, usually in studies of memory—but he is regrettably correct that their work remains relegated to epilogues and endnotes in most histories of the Vietnam War, in part because his cultural studies predecessors have paid little attention to foreign policy in a field dominated by diplomatic historians.<sup>3</sup> Robert Schulzinger’s recent foray into the post-1975 years suggests that this

---

<sup>2</sup> Jill Lepore, *The Name of War: King Philip’s War and the Origins of American Identity* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), xxi.

<sup>3</sup> Prominent works in this literature include: Keith Beattie, *The Scar that Binds: American Culture and the Vietnam War* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); H. Bruce Franklin, *Vietnam & Other American Fantasies* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America*, expanded and updated ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1993); James William

relative neglect may be at an end, as does Robert McMahon's 2001 SHAFR presidential address, where he argued that war's memory was "too important a subject for foreign relations specialists to abandon to the cultural historians, the cultural studies specialists, and the political polemicists."<sup>4</sup> Still, the legacies and memories chapter in the new edition of McMahon's *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War* is still the shortest of its fifteen chapters. The run-up to war, by comparison, receives five lengthy chapters.<sup>5</sup> These priorities reflect scholarship in the field, which remains oriented toward the prewar and early war period. By bringing a more sustained study of foreign policy to the cultural studies approach that has dominated the postwar literature, Martini aims to alter this orientation. He does so in part, to introduce a literature he values to diplomatic historians who may have overlooked it, a service to both communities and the growing numbers who work at their interstices.<sup>6</sup>

But disciplinary boundary crossing is only part of his agenda. Equally important is Martini's desire to expose the erasure of the nation and people of Vietnam from American narratives of the war, and his determination to reveal the ways in which that absence perpetuated the victimization of the Vietnamese people—the invisible enemies of his title. He sees this erasure as essential to the construction of punitive U.S. policies toward Vietnam and the reconstruction of American empire. For reasons that are never clear, but which have to do with the revival of "patriotic and nationalist metanarratives," he labels this process "normalization" in his introduction and in chapter two before jettisoning the confusing term for the remainder of his text (2, 9, 42, 48, 76).

What is clear is that Martini finds the dominant American visions of the war reprehensible. He devotes over half of his book to a discussion of the ways in which postwar films and other cultural expressions like the POW/MIA issue and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

---

Gibson, *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994); Kristin Ann Hass, *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Arnold R. Isaacs, *Vietnam Shadows: The War, Its Ghosts, and Its Legacy* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997); Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory, and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: New York University Press, 1998); Charles E. Neu, ed. *After Vietnam: Legacies of a Lost War* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Marita Sturken, *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

<sup>4</sup> Robert J. McMahon, "SHAFR Presidential Address: Contested Memory: The Vietnam War And American Society, 1975-2001," in *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 26, no. 2 (Spring 2002), 184; Robert Schulzinger, *A Time For Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Robert J. McMahon, ed., *Major Problems in the History of the Vietnam War: Documents and Essays*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2008). The introductory chapter is technically the shortest chapter in the book, as it lacks primary source documents, however the legacies and memories chapter is the shortest topical chapter.

<sup>6</sup> The introduction to the dissertation on which the book is based makes this goal clear. See Edwin A. Martini, "Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975-2000" (PhD diss., The University of Maryland, 2004), 7-50.



reversed the war's victimology by privileging American losses over far greater Vietnamese losses. This erasure found its apotheosis in Oliver Stone's 1986 film *Platoon*, where the main character delivers Stone's takeaway message in the voiceover that ends the film: "I think now, looking back, we did not fight the enemy. We fought ourselves. And the enemy was in us" (136). What is so absurd about this inane articulation of the stabbed-in-the-back thesis, Martini shows, is that it was greeted as veritable *cinéma vérité* by most commentators. Martini highlights and critiques the construction of such a skewed "reality" in his chapters on the war's overlapping, reinforcing misrepresentations.

For those familiar with the literature on the war's legacy, though, it is hardly news that popular representations of the war ignored the Vietnamese. Other scholars have written before about their absence in similar terms, if not at such length.<sup>7</sup> Martini admits Vietnamese elision is not surprising, advancing his claims on grounds of significance rather than originality—"that the pattern is not surprising," he asserts, "does not mean that it is not significant." "That such forms of cultural memory are 'normal,'" he writes, only "amplifies the need for scholars to show how, and in what contexts, they are constructed and understood" (8). But even on these grounds, Martini neither challenges nor improves upon existing studies, which have already established the revanchist nature of the representations he examines. And when it comes to understanding the meaning of such representations, his work exhibits the same limits as earlier studies. Prior studies have been astute in recognizing the operations of power within movies, monuments, and other cultural forms, but too quick to conclude that those representations had the intended effect. As Jay Winter wrote in his latest meditation on memory, "those who hold power always try to construct a narrative of the past legitimizing their authority. But their voices are never the only ones engaged in acts of remembrance." "Cultural history is a chorus," and any study of memory must "insist on specifying agency, on answering the question who remembers, when, where, and how?"<sup>8</sup>

In addressing this question of social agency, Martini falls short in ways that may trouble some diplomatic historians. For a book that takes Vietnamese absence as its subject, it is problematic that so few Vietnamese voices appear in its pages. The push for multiarchival research can be taken too far—Martini's subject is American memory, not Vietnamese memory; he need not replicate Hue-Tam Ho Tai's excellent *The Country of Memory*.<sup>9</sup> But surely the Vietnamese government, Vietnamese leaders, and Vietnamese refugees

---

<sup>7</sup> See Beattie, *The Scar That Binds*, 30-31; Franklin, *Vietnam & Other American Fantasies*, 32; G. Kurt Piehler, *Remembering War the American Way* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1995), 176; Schulzinger, *A Time For Peace*, 160, 170; Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 62, 82-83; Fred Turner, *Echoes of Combat: The Vietnam War in American Memory* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), 55, 68-70.

<sup>8</sup> Jay Winter, *Remembering War: The Great War Between Memory and History in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 277, 136, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

influenced American memory by asserting themselves in the face of American malign neglect.

We catch glimpses of this self-assertion in Martini's text, as when Vietnamese leaders insisted on postwar economic aid long past the point they were likely to get it. But elsewhere Vietnam's leaders are depicted as passive victims of U.S. policies, captive to events beyond their influence. This is particularly glaring in Martini's treatment of the Third Indochina War, where Vietnamese actors and interests nearly drop out of his discussion of Reagan administration support for anti-Vietnamese elements in Cambodia. And his discussion of normalization of relations presents the Vietnamese as victims of rapacious American business interests rather than participants in the process. Victims of American economic sanctions in the 1970s and 1980s, they remain victims when those policies are reversed in the 1990s. This is not to deny Martini's point that the U.S. government pursued mean-spirited policies toward Vietnam, usually with poorly defined goals. Nor do I mean to blame Vietnam for those policies, though its leaders could be obstinate in dealing with hostile U.S. officials. I only assert that we cannot understand international relations by looking at Washington alone, or by juxtaposing Washington and Hollywood in alternate chapters.

This juxtaposition is what makes Martini's work noteworthy. Unlike earlier postwar studies, Martini takes foreign relations seriously and seeks to show culture's influence on it. But we seldom see the interpenetration of the cultural and political. Aside from the POW/MIA issue, which flits in and out of his narrative, culture and policy are relegated to separate chapters. In the concluding paragraph of chapter four, for instance, we are told that "the historical/cultural inversion" of the 1980s meant that reconciliation between the U.S. and Vietnam was at hand, but nowhere in the next chapter does a policymaker or commentator adopt images or ideas from the preceding chapter to advance diplomatic relations (161-204). Indeed, normalization seems to operate independently of the logic Martini sets up in the book. How was it that the politically ambiguous films of the late 1970s lent themselves to the punitive policies of the Reagan era while the jingoistic films of the 1980s fostered improved relations in the 1990s, and how are we to explain the lag time between those cultural representations and normalization in 1995?

These connections go missing, at least in part, due to limitations in the evidence Martini relies on to make his case. Martini uses three kinds of sources: published congressional reports, popular sources such as films, magazines, and newspapers, and secondary scholarship. While each is a valuable source, only his secondary sources shed light on policy formation, and the best of these are already known to experts in the field.<sup>10</sup> In fairness, Martini is less interested in the "myriad memos and conversations" that shaped policy than in how policy debates were constructed and conducted in public (9-10, 3). But

---

<sup>10</sup> The best sources that Martini draws on in this regard are Nayan Chanda, *Brother Enemy: The War After the War* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986); Stephen Hurst, *The Carter Administration and Vietnam* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996); T. Christopher Jespersen, "The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, The Ford Administration and the Battle Over Vietnam 1975-76," *Diplomatic History* 24:2 (2000): 265-93.

even if we grant that culture's influence on policy can be grasped absent unpublished official sources, it is fair to ask if congressional hearings and mass media are the best and only sources needed to comprehend "the terms and acceptable limits of debate" (3). For it is not just Vietnamese voices that are missing from Martini's text, there are too few American voices as well, in part due to a lack of sources. We hear from a few POW/MIA activists in chapter five, but learn little about veterans' groups or non-profits, read little from editorial and opinion writers, and listen in on few conversations between those who, for whatever reason, care enough about the war to contest its memory in public. It is difficult to get a sense of why executive branch officials acted as they did on the basis of open testimony before Congress, and it is hard to say why congressmen responded as they did without more evidence of their interactions with interest groups and constituents. Evidence of broader and deeper debate about the war after 1975 would enhance Martini's promising analysis.

In his discussion of *Apocalypse Now*, Martini quotes film studies scholar Fran Tomasulo's critique of the famously ambiguous film—"what is needed," Tomasulo held, "is a *closed* text, a film that takes an *unambiguous* stance on the imperialist involvement and illegal conduct of the Vietnam Conflict." Martini then cites reception theory, which holds that viewers invariably make their own meaning, whatever the filmmaker's intent. "Nevertheless, Tomasulo's point is well taken," he writes, noting that films like *Apocalypse Now* "contribute to the 'social amnesia'" he deplors (69). Determined to expose the destruction Americans wreaked on Vietnam and their blindness to it, Martini has written something of a closed text himself, eschewing ambiguity in favor of a historical indictment. That indictment may be justified given the war's inequities, but it runs the risk of turning nations into fixed binaries of victims and villains where contestation is impossible and contingency goes out the window. Such a view is not so different from the mythic war Martini and I grew up with, only the roles are reversed. It seems the war is still not over.

Review by Robert K. Brigham, Vassar College

---

**E**dwin Martini, assistant professor of history at Western Michigan University, has written an interesting and thought-provoking book. He explores efforts by U.S. government officials, non-governmental functional elites, and the doyens of popular culture to punish Hanoi for forcing an American withdrawal from Vietnam. What started out as a rather innocuous policy of export controls in the Ford administration, turned into a full-fledged embargo against Vietnam that lasted twenty years. Martini recounts this turn by following Congressional hearings, especially those of Stephen Solarz (D-New York) and his House Subcommittee on Asian and Pacific Affairs, and the way the Vietnam war and the Vietnamese were portrayed in film, television, literature, and the popular media. He concludes these cultural representations intersected and interacted with U.S. foreign policy and shaped the character and the nature of relations between Washington and Hanoi.

*Robert K. Brigham, Shirley Ecker Boskey Professor of History and International Relations at Vassar College, earned his PhD with George Herring at the University of Kentucky. Brigham is author of several books on the Vietnam War, including the forthcoming *Iraq, Vietnam, and the Limits of American Power (PublicAffairs, 2008)*. He is currently working on a biography of Ho Chi Minh.*

The book is divided into six chapters that go back and forth between empirical discussions of Congressional action and Martini's analysis of the recuperative American narratives in popular culture. For Martini, the battle for ownership of the memory of the Vietnam war played a dominant role in the formulation of policy. In my view, Martini is at his best when describing Congressional sanctions and the role of the business community in pushing for full diplomatic recognition of Vietnam. I remain less convinced about the impact of popular culture on U.S. policy toward Vietnam.

In his first chapter, Martini examines the development of hostile trade policies toward Vietnam late in the Ford administration. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger pressured the secretary of commerce to place all of Vietnam and Cambodia in the most restricted category of export controls, under which American citizens were forbidden to send people in those countries any kind of economic or humanitarian aid. Within one year, Martini explains, those sanctions were extended to include all forms of international aid, access to international capital, and membership in the United Nations. These initial actions were never intended to be permanent, but Martini suggests it was far too easy to simply extend them because of the cultural climate in America toward the war. Far more interesting to me is Martini's discussion of the delegation of authority in these matters. Many readers will find it hard to believe that neither Congress nor the president had authority over sanctions against Vietnam in the post-war era. That authority had already been delegated to the secretary of state and the secretary of commerce. Martini's discussion on the first congressional hearings on these matters is also superb. He blames Congress for not putting oversight of sanctions into any bill and believes this failure opened the door for further problems.

Martini begins his cultural turn in the second chapter. He explores the POW/MIA issue and how movies and other forms of mass entertainment and information portrayed Hanoi's treatment of Americans who were supposedly left behind. Martini makes good use of the sources available, but perhaps does rely a bit too much on H. Bruce Franklin's work on this topic for analysis. There is no doubt that Martini—and Franklin for that matter—are right when they assign cultural power to the POW/MIA issue. The idea that Hanoi was still holding Americans long after the war was over did resonate loudly in corridors of power in Washington and may have played a role in tightening sanctions. And, Hanoi certainly did not handle this issue well. In November 1975, after the release of the remaining Ban Me Thout 12, a group of American missionaries still in Vietnam, Hanoi was left with the mistaken impression that withholding information about missing U.S. personnel would add leverage to Vietnam's overall bargaining position with Washington over reconstruction aid. This certainly was not the case, and it does now seem clear that Hanoi had little to bargain with anyway.

Still, Martini downplays any political explanation for continuing the embargo in favor of his cultural justification. I think he misses much here. For example, we get little of the strong policy differences in the Carter years between national security adviser, Zbigniew Brzezinski, and secretary of state Cyrus Vance. The impact of these disagreements on actual policy was enormous. For all the power of the POW/MIA issue, nothing was more influential than Carter's decision in 1978/1979 to normalize relations with China, and thereby continue sanctions against Vietnam. This decision had very little to do with the POW/MIA issue and very much to do with Brzezinski's staunch anti-Soviet feelings. He believed that Hanoi was aligned closely with Moscow and this was reason enough to continue sanctions. Although Carter initially signed on to extend détente and negotiated an arms control agreement with the Soviets, Brzezinski clearly accepted the Team B and Committee on the Present Danger reports. Like many budding neo-conservatives (though he is not one), he thought the Soviets were a sinister force. He argued that Moscow had gotten drunk on victory in Vietnam and used events there to legitimize more aggressive action in Ethiopia, Angola, and Mozambique. Vance, in sharp contrast, did not believe the Soviets fomented most local conflicts, and he supported quiet diplomacy to steadily improve U.S.-Soviet relations. This conflict over the Soviet Union eventually led Vance to resign his position, the first secretary of state to do so over a policy issue since William Jennings Bryan in 1915.

Carter's foreign policy is developed further, but not fully, in Martini's third chapter. Here, Martini traces the evolution of Carter's policies toward Vietnam and Cambodia. He rightfully suggests that Carter had every intention of normalizing relations with Hanoi when he came into office in 1977. Carter sent Leonard Woodcock, former president of the United Auto Workers union, to Hanoi to construct the framework for normalization. But Vietnamese officials who demanded the U.S. pay long-promised reparations before normalization took place rebuffed Woodcock. These meetings were followed by several face-to-face negotiations between Phan Hien, Vietnam's foreign minister at the time, and assistant secretary of state, Richard Holbrooke. Again, reparations were the stumbling block, but this time Phan Hien went to the press and showed a letter from Richard Nixon to premier Phan Van Dong promising postwar aid and reparations. Hearing this, Congress

became more bellicose towards Hanoi. Not only would the U.S. continue its embargo against Vietnam, but it would also move to keep international financial institutions—such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund—from sending financial aid to Vietnam.

In late 1978, there seemed to be a thaw in the cool relations between Washington and Hanoi. Holbrooke met with new Vietnamese foreign minister, Nguyen Co Thach, several times before both agreed that Hanoi would drop all pre-conditions for aid, such as the promised reparations, and that normal trade relations would soon follow. Holbrooke was incredibly optimistic and thought that normalization would occur any day. Within two months, however, everything changed. In December 1978, Hanoi announced a military campaign against Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge. With lightning strikes across the border, Vietnam's People's Army pushed the Khmer Rouge out of Phnom Penh and into the Cambodian countryside. Cambodia's long nightmare appeared over until Vietnam installed a government friendly to Hanoi. Congress saw Hanoi as the aggressor, despite all evidence to the contrary. Many in Congress linked Hanoi's repressive 1978 laws that prompted thousands of Vietnamese and ethnic Chinese to flee Vietnam by boat to Hanoi's actions in Cambodia. Furthermore, Brzezinski had convinced Carter to turn away from Moscow and Vietnam and instead normalize relations with China. Two months later, China attacked Vietnam to teach it a lesson. In all of this, the Carter administration and Congress condemned Hanoi's actions and supported China, even if that meant tacit support for the Khmer Rouge and its murderous regime. Accordingly, the Carter administration voted to seat the Khmer Rouge as Cambodia's official representatives at the United Nations.

The next three chapters build on the themes established in Martini's first three chapters. Chapter four explores the impact of popular magazines on prolonging the image of vengeful Vietnamese and captive POWs. These outlets also introduced other transgressions by Hanoi, including its treatment of former Saigon officials in re-education camps. Vietnam's human rights abuses replaced the POW/MIA issue in the minds of many in Congress, but for others missing Americans remained the key stumbling block to normalized relations. In chapter five, Martini looks at the Reagan years and the president's effort to re-write the history of the Vietnam war through soaring rhetoric. For Reagan, Vietnam was a noble cause in the long cold war and it looked as if that war too would end in an American victory. Despite the rise of victory culture in the United States, the embargo continued. But why? Was it the cultural hold the war had on people in the United States, or was it merely politics—that is, the absence of the political will necessary to change the geometry of U.S.-Vietnamese relations in any substantial way?

As Martini explains in his last chapter, it was not until president George H. W. Bush established a roadmap toward normalization that relations between the United States and Vietnam improved. Under Bush senior's administration, the United States opened a POW/MIA office in Hanoi and started to put that issue to rest. Vietnam devoted thousands of man-hours and its own resources to help teams of U.S. officials find the remains and document each MIA case. Senators John McCain (R-Arizona) and John Kerry (D-Massachusetts), both Vietnam vets, were tremendously useful in moving the U.S. toward normalization. Martini believes this effort on the POW/MIA issue changed the landscape of

U.S.-Vietnamese relations. And, the business community put enormous pressure on the Bush and Clinton administrations to move forward with restoring relations with Vietnam. At Vietnam's Sixth Party Congress in 1986, Hanoi had liberalized its trade and speculation laws considerably, leading to unprecedented economic growth and new investment opportunities. American businesses were being hurt by the embargo and had to play catch up in Vietnam, a country of 80 million people. I believe Martini could do more here with these non-governmental functional elites, especially the U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council. Clearly, Al Baker, the CEO of Halliburton, who supported normalization, was just as powerful as the POW/MIA lobby in the minds of most U.S. officials. And, perhaps Martini could have explained in greater detail the absence of political will in the White House where the embargo was concerned. Eventually, Congress voted to lift the restrictions against international financial institution giving aid to Vietnam. In 1994, McCain and Kerry introduced legislation to end the embargo. Final normalization of relations took place in July 1995.

Martini should be commended for adding significantly to our understanding of the war after the war. His description of Congress during the twenty years of the U. S. embargo against Vietnam is unmatched and his keen sense of the force of cultural factors in U.S. foreign policy cannot easily be ignored, even if I remain unconvinced by some of his arguments. This is a first-rate book and must reading for anyone interested in recent U.S. foreign policy.

Review by Matthew Masur, St. Anselm College

---

In *Invisible Enemies*, Edwin Martini quotes one of Robert Duvall's famous lines from "Apocalypse Now": "You know, someday this war's going to end" (230). The war *did* end, Martini argues, but not when most people think. After America's withdrawal in 1973 and North Vietnam's successful offensive in 1975, the United States pursued its "war on Vietnam" for another two decades. The war was not over until the 1990s, when the United States ended its economic embargo against Vietnam and normalized relations with the communist country. Even then, Americans continued to fight over the meaning of Vietnam and the appropriate ways in which to remember the war.

**Matthew Masur** is Assistant Professor of History at St. Anselm College in Manchester, New Hampshire. He earned his PhD from Ohio State University in 2004. His publications include "Falling Dominoes: The United States, Vietnam, and the War in Iraq" in John Dumbrell and David Ryan, eds. *Vietnam in Iraq: Tactics, Lessons, Legacies, and Ghosts* (Routledge, 2006) and, with Edward Miller, "Saigon Revisited: Researching South Vietnam's Republican Era" for the Cold War International History Project. He is currently revising an article for publication in *Diplomatic History*.

Martini's investigation of U.S.-Vietnamese relations after 1975 is a welcome addition to the historiography on the Vietnam War. Readers of *Diplomatic History* and H-Diplo have no doubt noticed the recent flood of important scholarship on the early stages of the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> Martini takes a different tack, addressing the "persistent invisibility" of the post-1975 years by drawing the narrative toward the present rather than extending it further into the past (4). The result is a valuable study that is less concerned with how the United States got into Vietnam than what happened after the United States withdrew.

Martini argues that the United States waged "economic, political, and cultural war on Vietnam long after 1975" (2). Economically, the United States imposed a punitive embargo that hampered Vietnam's economic development. Politically, the U.S. refused to normalize relations with Vietnam while supporting—sometimes overtly, sometimes tacitly—Vietnam's main adversaries, China and Cambodia. Americans also constructed an "inverted" history of the war that recast the United States as the victim while marginalizing and dehumanizing the Vietnamese and downplaying their suffering. This narrative was apparent in American films that almost always ignored Vietnamese experiences and emphasized the psychic toll on American vets. It was also apparent in debates over the effects of Agent Orange and the location of MIAs' remains. These discussions emphasized

---

<sup>1</sup>Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence, 2000); Jessica M. Chapman, "Staging Democracy: South Vietnam's 1955 Referendum to Depose Bao Dai," *Diplomatic History* 30, no. 4 (September, 2006 ): 671-703; Seth Jacobs, *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia* (Durham, 2004); Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley, 2005); Edward Miller, "Vision, Power, and Agency: The Ascent of Ngô Đình Diệm, 1945-54," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 35, no. 3, (October 2004): 433-458; Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Cambridge, 2006); Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington, 2007).



the importance of the American experience while failing to discuss the important questions of Vietnamese suffering. Martini suggests that this inverted history fostered public support for the vengeful policies that continued long after the war ended.

One of Martini's goals for *Invisible Enemies* is to "transgress the existing disciplinary boundaries that have limited our understanding of the United States and Vietnam after 1975" (5). He acknowledges the risk that his approach may "satisfy neither diplomatic nor cultural historians and may upset both" (9). On the contrary, cultural and diplomatic historians alike will find much to recommend this book. Traditional diplomatic historians will appreciate his close reading of Congressional hearings and his exploration of the diplomatic tensions between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (S.R.V.). Those favoring a cultural approach will appreciate Martini's examination of films, television shows, and comic books to argue that post-war American culture relegated elements of the U.S.-Vietnamese relationship "completely outside the boundaries of public discourse or cultural representation" (3).

Martini's approach does create a stylistic dilemma. For the most part, the subject matter of each chapter in *Invisible Enemies* can be broadly classified as "diplomatic" or "cultural." By alternating his approach, his narrative is at times disjointed. This does not, however, detract from the overall force of his arguments.

The Vietnam War is often described as a tragedy that could have been avoided. In this characterization, American policymakers from Truman to Nixon missed opportunities to end America's commitment to Vietnam or to withdraw American forces. Martini shows that a similar pattern emerged after the war. Time after time, the United States had opportunities to establish a fair and peaceful relationship with the S.R.V. Time after time, memories of the war inflamed passions and prevented an end to the vindictive policies. Even in peace, Americans were not ready to put the war behind them.

If there is one puzzling omission from *Invisible Enemies*, it is an examination of the role of Vietnamese Americans in the post-war period. Martini makes no mention of the Vietnamese Americans who were (and are) active in agitating against the communist government. Outside of one brief mention, he does not describe the many Vietnamese American entrepreneurs who opposed the embargo and helped to create a vibrant U.S.-Vietnamese commercial relationship in the years since normalization. In a chapter devoted to memorializing and remembering the war, Martini says nothing about the many veterans of the South Vietnamese armed forces who resettled in the United States. He also leaves the reader wondering about the historical memories of Vietnamese refugees. How did their particular circumstances—enemies of the new government; dismissed, abandoned, and often forgotten by their allies—fit into post-war American narratives? Like the Vietnamese who remained in Vietnam, are they also destined to be silenced and marginalized in America's narrative of the war?

Martini should be credited for writing the book he did, not for failing to write the book a reviewer would have preferred. Martini himself admits that he, like all authors, was forced to "render certain things outside the narrative boundaries" of his study (9). In spite of this

limitation, he succeeded on a number of levels. Teachers of courses on the Vietnam War will find *Invisible Enemies* a useful source for bringing their class to the end of the twentieth century. Scholars of American foreign relations will appreciate a fresh and engaging approach to a topic that is sorely in need of historical study.

Despite decades of bitter conflict, establishing relatively conventional diplomatic and economic relations between America and Vietnam after 1975 should not have been all that difficult. Both sides had a clear national interest in ending the bitterness that marked the end of the war in 1973. While they disagreed about the terms of an accommodation, representatives of both the United States and Vietnam expressed a desire for “normalized” relations between the two countries. The Carter administration certainly appeared to be committed to launching a more peaceful and tranquil era in American-Vietnamese relations.

*James McAllister received his Ph.D. in Political Science from Columbia University in 1999 and is currently an Associate Professor of Political Science at Williams College. He is the author of No Exit: America and the German Problem, 1943-1954 (2002) and articles on the Vietnam War that have been published in Pacific Historical Review, Small Wars and Insurgencies, and Modern Asian Studies. He is currently working on a book about American Ambassadors to South Vietnam during the Johnson Administration.*

In May 1977, Assistant Secretary of State Richard Holbrooke met in Paris with official representatives of Vietnam and declared, “We have fought a long and difficult war with your country. Both sides fought bravely for what they considered right. Now that war is over, and the President feels the time has come to put it behind us.”<sup>1</sup> Needless to say, putting the Vietnam War “behind us” proved to be a far more difficult and complicated process than anyone could have reasonably anticipated in 1977. “Normalization” of American-Vietnamese relations would be delayed until well into the administration of President Clinton. Unfortunately, as Edward Martini persuasively demonstrates in his provocative new book, neither historical memory nor the influence of cultural representations can be swept aside as easily as the architects of American foreign policy often seem to assume.

*Invisible Enemies* is an original and welcome addition to the existing literature on the Vietnam War. In addition to providing a critique of American policy towards Vietnam after 1975, a period generally ignored by students of the war, Martini effectively combines the fields of diplomatic history and cultural studies. Bridging the gap between cultural studies and traditional diplomatic history is a goal universally applauded in theory, but rarely honored in practice. As the author himself notes, *Invisible Enemies* “may satisfy neither diplomatic nor cultural historians and upset both (9).” Fortunately, Martini ignored the temptation to tailor his book to the conventions of either group and the result is a work of scholarship that truly does transcend narrow disciplinary boundaries. Diplomatic historians might wish that Martini spent more time on the policy memoranda and diplomatic conversations that he admittedly glosses over, but they should also appreciate the lack of jargon and extended discussion over topics such as “the polyvalence of textual meaning.” While cultural studies scholars might wish that Martini spent more time discussing these sorts of theoretical issues, *Invisible Enemies* will be a much more

---

<sup>1</sup> “Outline of Opening Remarks by Mr. Holbrooke US-SRV Talks,” May 3, 1977, Reproduced in *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Document Number CK3100113135.

influential study precisely because the author wrote his book in a manner that is readily accessible to historians who are not already adherents of the cultural studies approach to foreign relations.

The central arguments of the book, although certainly not the only ones, are to be found in the title. Drawing on Clausewitz, Martini argues that the American war on Vietnam did not really come to an end in 1975 but continued in a variety of forms such as embargoes, diplomatic non-recognition, political and military support for the enemies of Vietnam, as well as the hostile images of the Vietnamese people contained in popular films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Rambo*. Driven by a process of “cultural inversion,” and no longer constrained by graphic images of American violence, the nature of the Vietnam War was transformed fairly rapidly among the wider populace. Regardless of their artistic merits, even supposedly allegedly antiwar films such as *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon* uniformly portrayed the Vietnamese as sadistic and savage killers or ignored them completely. The unifying thread of virtually all of the major films about the war is their emphasis on American citizens and soldiers as the real victims of the war. The far greater sufferings of the Vietnamese people during the war, let alone their continued suffering after the war, are either minimized or completely ignored. Often hailed as the best and the most realistic of the classic films about the Vietnam War, Martini suggests that Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* instead represents the logical conclusion of all that is wrong with Hollywood’s efforts to come to terms with Vietnam: “To argue, as *Platoon* does, that the enemy was “us” is not simply to ignore why the United States became involved in Southeast Asia; it is also to render invisible the incredible devastation wrought on Vietnam at the hands of the United States over several decades (136).”

Some scholars might argue that Martini’s analysis of the films about the Vietnam War is interesting, but largely irrelevant to any consideration of American foreign policy toward Vietnam after 1975. However, Martini does make a persuasive case that cultural influences and the realm of policymaking and legislation cannot be easily separated. For example, one of the most pernicious effects of films such as *The Deer Hunter* and *Rambo* was the political life they provided to sustaining what should have become a very minor issue in American political life after the war: the fate of American POW’s/MIA’s.<sup>2</sup> Drawing heavily on the previous work of Bruce Franklin, Martini argues that the mythical idea that Vietnam was continuing to hold some unspecified number of live POW’s after the war played a major role in delaying the process of rapprochement between the United States and Vietnam. Despite the fact that there was no credible and compelling evidence to support the idea that Hanoi was holding American soldiers hostage, and much logic and evidence to the contrary, as late as 1991 the official position of the Bush administration continued to be

---

<sup>2</sup> If there was any compelling evidence that Vietnam was holding American prisoners of war, the POW/MIA issue should have deservedly been a top priority of the American government. However, the 1976 report of the House Select Committee on Missing Persons in Southeast Asia firmly established that “no Americans (were) still being held alive as prisoners in Indochina, or elsewhere, as a result of the war in Indochina.” Quotation cited in T. Christopher Jespersen, “The Bitter End and the Lost Chance in Vietnam: Congress, the Ford Administration, and the Battle over Vietnam, 1975-76,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol.24, No.2 (Spring 2000), p.290. The quotations from the Bush administration and Zbigniew Brzezinski can be found in Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, pp.173, 185.

either “that at least some Americans are still held captive,” or in the view of Zbigniew Brzezinski, “the Vietnamese took hundreds of American officers out and shot them in cold blood” after the end of the war.

*Invisible Enemies* is usually stronger on the cultural front of the war than it is on the political front. Martini directly links the Hollywood films of the late 1970’s with the specific policies of the Carter administration by suggesting that both “helped to pave the way for the reconstruction of the American imperial project in the wake of the war (48).” However, unlike critics such as Noam Chomsky, Martini never really provides the reader with any clear conception of what the “American imperial project” consists of after the Vietnam War. What larger political goals were served by treating Vietnam as an enemy after 1975? Chomsky would probably argue that the United States pursues punitive policies towards revolutionary and socialist states in order to demonstrate to others that there are serious costs and consequences for even successful challenges to American domination. In contrast, Martini never seems to put forward an explicit or even implicit argument about the larger purposes of American foreign policy that were intended to be served by a sustained policy of “bleeding Vietnam.”

While diplomatic historians should generally welcome *Invisible Enemies*, there are legitimate questions to be raised about some of the choices made by the author. For example, while Martini relies heavily on the use of congressional testimonies and other records related to the legislative branch, he devotes very little attention to the executive branch of government. The author does not appear to have visited either the Ford or Carter libraries, both of which would certainly seem to possess many valuable and important documents related to American policy towards Vietnam. Despite the fact that many of these documents are readily available online through *Declassified Documents Reference System*, Martini does not examine any of this material. In fact, one will not even find any references to the published memoirs of President Carter, Cyrus Vance, or Zbigniew Brzezinski in *Invisible Enemies*. While I do not disagree with the positive argument that there is much to be learned from Congressional records and hearings, Martini’s explanation for relying almost exclusively on these records is not particularly satisfying. In his view, congressional hearings are “usually less sanitized sources of information than policy briefings or policy statements from the executive branch (pp.2-3).” If executive branch records consisted solely or even primarily of policy briefings and policy statements, it might be acceptable for researchers to pay little attention to them. However, judging by the numerous documents of interest from the Ford and Carter administrations readily available on *DDRS*, I believe that it is hard for Martini to justify his decision not to examine these sources in his book.

Martini’s use of sources is important because his interpretive framework often relies on broad generalizations about “the American government.” For example, he argues that “in the years immediately following the end of the American war in Vietnam, the American government began to pursue “war by other means,” reclassifying the newly reunited nation of Vietnam as an “enemy” and pursuing openly hostile and unprecedented economic and diplomatic policies against the Vietnamese (42).” Statements like this convey the idea of the American government as a unitary actor pursuing a rational and unified strategy

against Vietnam after 1975. However, what is fairly obvious from Martini's own account, as well as other research on the immediate aftermath of the war, is that the American government during this period of time was basically incapable of pursuing any coherent or unified strategy toward Vietnam. As Christopher Jespersen points out, the efforts of some members of Congress to pursue a more enlightened policy towards Vietnam in the 1975-76 period were blocked by the more intransigent positions of Henry Kissinger and Gerald Ford. During the Carter years the situation was largely reversed as many members of Congress made it abundantly clear that they were not going to help Carter at all in his efforts to normalize relations with Vietnam. American policies in the immediate years after 1975 look much less like a conscious decision to "wage war" and much more as a messy result of intra-governmental rivalries, the application of standard operating procedures, election year politics, and the strong influence of domestic lobbies such as the POW/MIA lobby.

Despite these criticisms, *Invisible Enemies* remains an important contribution to the literature on the Vietnam War. Its innovative attempt to combine diplomatic history and cultural studies will surely influence future studies of the war.

Author's Response by Ed Martini, Western Michigan University

---

I want to begin by thanking H-Diplo, Tom Maddux, and the four reviewers for making this roundtable possible. I feel honored to have my work discussed on the list, and particularly honored to have it addressed so comprehensively by four esteemed colleagues whose work I admire. The incisive and constructive comments made by Michael Allen, Robert Brigham, Matt Masur, and James McAllister, have given me much to ponder, and I will do my best to respond here to several of the issues they raised about *Invisible Enemies*.

Somewhat appropriately, I am writing this response from Vietnam, where I am at work on a new book project on the history and legacies of Agent Orange and other chemical agents used by the United States and its South Vietnamese allies during the war. As I am traveling without the benefits of my books (including my own), I hope readers will forgive my lack of specificity in page numbers and external references.

*Edwin Martini* received his Ph.D. in American Studies from the University of Maryland in 2004 and his B.A. in American Studies from Pitzer College in 1998. Ed is an assistant professor of history at Western Michigan University. He is currently the editor of the H-1960s listserv, and an article review editor at H-Diplo. His work has appeared in *The Journal of American History* and *Reviews in American History*, most notably "The Virtual Walls and the Widows of War Memorial," *Journal of American History*, Vol. 87, No. 3 (December, 2000), 987-991; "Much More Than My Lai," *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (September, 2007), 432-439; "Being Henry Kissinger," *Reviews in American History* Vol. 37, No. 1 (Forthcoming, March, 2008). Currently, he is at work on a book project entitled "Agent Orange: A History" (under contract with the University of Massachusetts Press for the "Culture, Politics, and the Cold War" series). The book explores the global histories and legacies of the use of chemical agents by the United States during the war in Vietnam. Martini also has a forthcoming article, "Bringing the War Home: Agent Orange As International History," in *New World Coming: The Global Legacies of the 1960s*, edited by Robert Clarke in 2009.

As someone whose degrees are all in American Studies, I have been incredibly fortunate over the past few years to be involved in a number of discussions and roundtables devoted to the intersections of cultural and diplomatic history. As I understand it from my last encounter on this issue at SHAFR, the war is over; culture does indeed matter. Thus I have no wish to reopen wounds or fronts in this battle. It does seem to me, however, that many of the common criticisms about my book from the reviewers (criticisms which I find for the most part to be entirely justified) stem from ongoing and unresolved questions in cultural approaches to foreign relations history.

As each of the reviewers noted, I state in my introduction to the book that I am pursuing an approach to the study of American policy toward Vietnam after 1975 that "may satisfy neither diplomatic and cultural historians and upset both." Since this interdisciplinary anxiety hung ominously over much this project, I take great pleasure in seeing Matt Masur's comment that "cultural and diplomatic historians alike will find much to recommend" the book, and James McAllister's assertion that the book "effectively combines the fields of diplomatic history and cultural studies," something "usually applauded in theory but rarely

honored in practice.” Michael Allen seems to have greater reservations about my approach, and I will attempt to address those concerns below.

It continues to be my belief that historians of American foreign relations have been far more open to new ideas in this ongoing dialogue than their cultural studies colleagues, and that scholars trained in interdisciplinary fields like American Studies still have a great deal yet to learn from diplomatic history in thinking about states, policy formation, and international relations in general. Most of the criticisms of my book offered here reflect three broad areas that continue to provide fertile ground for discussion between these fields: sources, causality, and agency. I will address my responses to those three areas in turn.

First, on the question of sources, Brigham and McAllister both point out the limited attention I give to the executive branch in discussing the formation of foreign policy. Brigham praises my attention to the legislative branch and my focus on Congressional Hearings, but suggests I could have “explained in greater detail the absence of political will” in several successive administrations to end the embargo and move toward normalization. I agree with this assessment, and with his suggestion that I could have focused more on the role of business interests in eventually lobbying to end the embargo, particularly since I give so much weight to the economic forces in that process.

Michael Allen suggests in a similar vein that I might have done more to emphasize the role played by other groups, including veterans’ organizations and non-profits, in affecting policy shifts. I have no doubt that greater attention to these types of groups would shed more light on the policy process that brought about an end to the embargo. Yet, based on the fact that veterans groups, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and the POW/MIA lobby all make appearances in the congressional hearings and that each got their talking points into the newspapers at the crucial times, I have little reason to believe the larger argument I make about the eventual end to the embargo would be any different based on more detailed records of the organizations, but it is certainly worth a second look. A particularly insightful criticism on a related point comes from Matt Masur, who wonders why I did not focus more on the Vietnamese diaspora and the role of overseas Vietnamese in shaping and contesting U.S. policy. I could not agree more. I initially planned to include a substantial discussion of this matter but eventually chose not to, largely for reasons of space. In hindsight, I agree with Masur that this could have added a considerable amount of richness to my study.

My argument about the end of the embargo, quite simply, is that the sanctions program eventually began to hurt U.S. business interests, and that this finally came to trump the POW/MIA lobby’s continued calls for more sticks and fewer carrots, a line that had remained largely unchanged since the 1970s. When witnesses and policymakers were able to articulate that “access” to Vietnam would benefit Halliburton and AT&T as much as the National League of Families, the embargo was finally lifted. Thus, when Brigham asks why the embargo continued—was it cultural or political?—my answer is that it was cultural, political, and economic. The reason for the absence of political will—in both the legislative and executive branches—was primarily because of the revisionist myths promulgated by



the POW/MIA lobby and reinforced by American popular culture, myths that demonized and eventually rendered invisible the Vietnamese. In the end, however, even these powerful myths were pushed aside by the dictates of global capital and the desire to gain access to the Vietnamese market. Brigham is certainly right to make the point that the contours of my argument on this point could have been drawn more sharply.

McAllister raises perhaps the most important point about sources. Why, he wonders, did I not make greater use of materials from the Ford and Carter administrations, relying instead “almost exclusively” on Congressional Records. My standard response to this criticism of my approach—which I have encountered throughout the project--has been twofold: First, I am particularly interested in the role played by Congress in trying to reassert itself in the formation of foreign policy in the wake of Vietnam, Cambodia, and Watergate; and, secondly, as several reviewers noted, my interest lays more in the public debate, (or lack thereof) about U.S. policy toward Vietnam than it does in the formation of policy itself. Some diplomatic historians no doubt find this latter point puzzling. What McAllister and others rightly point out, however, is that greater attention to policy debates within the executive branch itself would have likely enhanced my focus on the contours of public discourse and perhaps revealed more explicitly the connections between culture and policy that are also of central interest in this study. Just as importantly however, I remain firm in my belief that the role of Congress in the production and oversight of foreign policy remains a topic that is grossly understudied by diplomatic historians. Given the ways in which Congress abandoned its constitutional responsibilities in this area with regard to both Vietnam and Iraq, this seems to me a particularly useful time to be exploring Congressional derelictions of duty.

I am less convinced that McAllister is right in arguing that my use of sources results in a portrayal of “the American government as a unitary actor pursuing a rational and unified strategy against Vietnam after 1975,” a view McAlister believes is belied by my own analysis. My argument in the book is very clearly that U.S. policy was not “rational,” and that the embargo and other attempts to isolate Vietnam worked against many American strategic and economic interests. The public debates over these policies, such as they are, were indeed messy; at times they were incoherent, at others surreal. But the net result of the policy, from 1975 until 1994, is remarkably static. Regardless of the subtle shifts in policy from Ford to Carter and from Carter to Reagan, and regardless of the intentions of a variety of advocacy groups, Vietnam was treated throughout this period as an official enemy of the United States, and was subject to punitive and hostile policies by the American state. To draw a contemporary parallel, the effort to invade and occupy Iraq has been neither coherent nor well thought out but the net result has also not changed. “The American government” decided to invade and occupy Iraq, just as it chose to maintain a hostile set of policies toward Vietnam. For the objects of these policies, it seems to me, it matters little if the subject constructing the policy was unified or not. The net result of the policy remains unchanged.

Among the reviewers, Michael Allen appears to have found the most to disagree with. There may not be space here to address all of his criticisms, but I will attempt to answer those dealing with issues that I consider to be at the heart of our differing views and,

perhaps, at the heart of still unresolved issues of argument and methodology between cultural and diplomatic historians: questions of agency and causality.

First, Allen argues that my analysis of cultural representations of the war “neither challenges nor improves upon existing studies,” and that it fails to “specify agency” by answering the question of when, where, and how people remember. I am puzzled by this assertion, particularly given Allen’s lack of direct engagement with the arguments that I make in those sections of the book. In each of the “cultural” sections of the book, I go to great lengths to consider the question of reception: presumably the who, when, where and how of cultural memory for which Allen is searching.

For instance, it is true that my analysis of the major Vietnam war films of the late 1970s covers much familiar ground. However, few if any of the previous studies to which Allen points pay much attention to reception; most do not address the issue at all. Given my interest in how these films shape and were shaped by public discourse about the war and its legacies, I consider at some length how reviewers and audiences responded to these films, how they were shaped by the economics and politics of Hollywood, and why films that offered less spectacle but greater historical fidelity, such as *Go Tell the Spartans* (1978), failed to reach the audiences gained by the “big three” of *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, and *Apocalypse Now*. Examining the reception of these films as I do, adds much, I would argue, to understanding the contested place of “Vietnam” in post-Vietnam War American culture, particularly the ways in which they resemble U.S. policy toward Vietnam during this period.

It was particularly surprising to me that neither Allen nor the other reviewers mention my treatment of comic books and war memorials. If Allen’s concern is that there is nothing new or original in my analysis, I would be interested to know what other approaches have linked *Rambo*, *Platoon*, and *The ‘Nam* (a Marvel comic book), in the manner I suggest. I spend several pages in chapter four exploring how these two important films were received by a variety of figures, and even more space exploring the ways in which actual readers of the comic book, young and old alike, used the juxtaposition of *Rambo* and *Platoon* to construct shared visions of the historical “reality” of the war. In my final chapter, on the Wall and its virtual progeny, I detail a variety of ways in which real visitors to these sites actively construct social and cultural memory. Far from simply “concluding” that these various cultural forms produced “the intended effect,” as Allen puts it, I attempt to show that none of these cultural commodities, memorials, and representations were predestined to appear the way they do or be received in the ways they were. Rather, by focusing on the ways in which these “texts” were produced and received, I believe I reinforce my argument that the cultural forces of historical revisionism indeed run deep and wide in American culture.

Just as important as the question of who remembers and how, though, is the question about the causal relationship between culture and policy. My argument about the relationship between policy formation and cultural formation is one that cannot be reduced to a simple causality. I consider the two areas to be fundamentally intertwined and not easily separated. I fully agree with the reviewers, all of whom noted that my separation of the

cultural and political into separate chapters undermines the connections I attempt to make. I remain somewhat displeased that I could not devise a more sophisticated organizational plan for the book, although I do believe that the largely chronological approach does provide for greater narrative coherence than most alternatives.

Organization aside, however, I provide in the book a fairly extensive discussion of the relationship between the political and the cultural, but it may be one that does not ultimately satisfy the causality question. Allen, it seems to me, takes a very traditional approach to the question of causality when he asks how it was that “the politically ambiguous films of the 1970s lent themselves to the punitive policies of the Reagan era while jingoistic films of the 1980s fostered improved relations?” This seems to me a clear misreading of my argument, and one driven by a search for a very linear form of causality for which I do not argue, and do not believe exists in this case. My argument about the “politically ambiguous” films of the 1970s is that they are less ambiguous than we might assume when viewed through the lens of their representations of the Vietnamese. In my view, and in the minds of many contemporary reviewers, *The Deer Hunter* was no less jingoistic than *Rambo*, nor *Platoon* much more reality based than *Apocalypse Now*.

More importantly, however, I do not argue that these films “lent themselves” to the punitive policies of the Reagan years; rather, my point is that these films were driven by the same cultural logic of “mutual destruction” proclaimed by President Carter in 1977. The same cultural forces that encouraged American audiences in the 1970s to focus exclusively on what the war in Vietnam did “to us,” I argue, drove Carter’s assertions that the war was as destructive to the United States as it was to Vietnam, an assumption that was central to his administration’s negotiating strategy with the Vietnamese and to Congressional reluctance to support normalization. The sanctions policies and the lack of political will, to borrow Brigham’s phrase, were indeed driven by this cultural logic, more so than any coherent or rational policy goals; and these policies were no less punitive under Carter than under Reagan. In short, I do not argue that cultural representations drove policy; I argue that American popular culture and U.S. foreign policy toward Vietnam during this period were driven by same cultural logic. That is a form of cultural causality, but not the type for which Allen, as I understand his comments, is searching.

Finally, there is the question of Vietnamese agency. Allen argues that in my discussion of the economic normalization between the United States and Vietnam I present the Vietnamese as “victims” rather than “participants,” thus denying them their due agency. As my discussion of the normalization negotiations in chapter one indicates, however, the Vietnamese were indeed active participants in the normalization process, and made several strategic missteps that might have set back the process during the Carter administration. By the time the Bush administration announced its “Roadmap” to normalization in the early 1990s, it seems very clear to me that the Vietnamese position was, at best, reactive. How else are we to explain the one-sided terms of the roadmap? This policy, which was not negotiated with the Vietnamese but presented to them, offered only a gradual and slight easing of the draconian embargo in exchange for the Vietnamese making sufficient “progress” in locating and identifying remains of long-dead soldiers that might somehow placate the insatiable demands of the POW/MIA lobby? (The centrality itself of the

POW/MIA issue in negotiations demonstrates exactly how tilted the normalization playing field remained for twenty years.) How else are we to explain the fact that the Bush administration placed the lifting of the de facto U.S. ban on multilateral lending to Vietnam in the final stage of the road map? It is, quite simply, so that U.S. corporations would not miss out on opportunities as the Vietnamese market opened up.

My question for Michael Allen is this: What cards, exactly, were the Vietnamese holding by 1991? As I argue in the book, the well of Soviet aid to Vietnam went dry as the Cold War drew to a close, and while the liberalization of the Vietnamese economy in the 1980s eventually made it a much more attractive site for foreign investment, Vietnam remained subject to the ban on international lending from ostensibly multilateral sources that the United States instituted and maintained from 1978 to 1994. As I argue in chapter five, even with the end of the embargo in 1994, the U.S. continued to deny Vietnam normal trade relations status, exploiting the Vietnamese market while levying heavy import duties on Vietnamese goods to the U.S. The Vietnamese government, I argue in that chapter, clearly realized that the road map represented a one-way street. To search out additional forms of Vietnamese agency in this scenario seems to me to be grasping at straws.

This brings me to Allen's final major criticism of my work, which is that my narrative, in seeking to "expose the destruction Americans wreaked on Vietnam and their blindness to it" "runs the risk of turning nations into fixed binaries of victims and villains where contestation is impossible and contingency goes out the window." In doing so, he argues, I have simply reinforced the "mythic war" with which our generation grew up.

I have to admit that I am unsure what to make of this criticism. In my view there is nothing "fixed" about the policies set forth by the United States, nor in the representations of the Vietnamese in American culture that I discuss. I fail to see where in my book contingency leapt out the window. I do take Allen's point that we should seek to move beyond simplistic categories, even if I do not agree that I have failed to do so in my work. I can only say that I fail to see why a narrative that demonstrates that the most powerful nation in the world pursued an aggressive, punitive, irrational, and ultimately counterproductive policy against a far poorer and less powerful nation that it had spent the previous two decades destroying should be seen as a story without victims and villains. The roles seem fairly clear to me.

Throughout my current trip to Vietnam I have been reminded, as I was on my last visit in 2001, both of the ongoing scars of war for this country and the remarkably consistent way in which the Vietnamese people seek to put the past behind them. "Let bygones be bygones" is a phrase I have heard often over the last week, from civilians to ARVN veterans to former members of the National Liberation Front. Just yesterday, I was in Vinh Long province near the Mekong Delta. I met with several families who claim to have been horribly affected by Agent Orange. For them, the war's legacies are apparent, and the post-1975 period as much as the war itself offer fairly clear victims and villains. Yet they do not, for the most part, exude anger; nor do they desire revenge. What they seek is justice, fairness, and an acknowledgment of the devastation that the American War against their country continues to wreak.

It is my hope and my belief that these two countries will continue to move forward in their relationship, despite the history of American aggression directed at Vietnam. Moving forward, however, ultimately requires that Americans recognize that the war did not end in 1975, and in many ways continues to this day, materially for the Vietnamese far more so than symbolically for the United States. I hope to continue to study this process, and as I do, I am confident that my work will continue to benefit immeasurably as a result of my interactions with diplomatic historians and the insightful comments of colleagues like Allen, Brigham, Masur, and McAllister. I thank them again for their thoughtful comments, and I look forward to hearing further from them and from others.

---

**Copyright © 2008 H-Net: Humanities and Social Sciences Online.** H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, H-Diplo, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the H-Diplo Editors at [h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu](mailto:h-diplo@h-net.msu.edu).

---