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Introduction by Lloyd Gardner, Rutgers University

John Prados has been a leading scholar of the Vietnam War for nearly three decades beginning with Operation Vulture, first published in 1983, an account of the debates in the Eisenhower Administration over what to do about the besieged French fortress at Dien Bien Phu. His books span the war’s chronology, and dive into specifics with the determination of a pathfinder. He has also authored many related studies on the history of American intelligence policies and practices, including a political biography of William Colby, Lost Crusader, published in 2003. And now he has presented us with what one might fairly say is his culminating work on Vietnam, Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975. Like all of his previous books, The History of an Unwinnable War is solidly based on archival sources, indeed is a prodigious research effort, and is presented in a highly readable style. Unlike his previous work, however, this book contains long sections of personal “witness” to the war from his time at Columbia University, as well as his decision to champion a group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), that he feels other authors have not dealt with adequately in accounting for the changing moods inside the United States as the war became a multi-front endurance test.

Prados is not afraid of taking strong positions on key issues in the war. To take but three examples from various points in the war, Prados believes President Dwight Eisenhower was much more ready to intervene in 1954 than most students of that era have maintained; second, he is a skeptic about the strongly-held notion by some scholars that President John F. Kennedy would have seen an exit route from Vietnam that Lyndon Johnson ignored; and third, he is skeptical of current suggestions that General Creighton Abrams’s strategy to fight a “better war” would have produced victory. Despite expressing admiration for Abrams, Prados argues that it was too late for that. Indeed it had been too late from the beginning. He concludes that the war was unwinnable above all because no government ever emerged in Saigon that could command the loyalty of the people. The failure was there, not in Washington’s faulty strategy, or because the liberal media created a false picture of the situation in Vietnam.

The response of our reviewers to Unwinnable War is unanimous praise of the research that went into the writing of this book. David Anderson praises Prados for producing a book that successfully strikes a balance between synthesis and detail. He finds Prados makes the case that Vietnam’s importance in the Cold War was exaggerated from the outset, and that error was compounded by the belief that South Vietnam could ever be anything else than a “pseudo-nation.” Much heartbreak would follow from these assumptions. But Anderson feels that Prados has overstated the case for inevitability, not about ultimate defeat, but about possible choices after Dien Bien Phu. He sees Kennedy and Johnson as not only troubled about the policy, but actually having had real options to find an exit route. Like the other reviewers, Anderson wonders about the injection of the personal witness portions of the book, granting their “I was there” usefulness, but concerned that they open the author to the charge that personal reminiscences risk being idiosyncratic. Still, he concludes, on balance the device does work to reach “another level of truth.” And as do the
others, Anderson notes the author’s determination to draw parallels with the Iraq War and Afghanistan.

Robert Brigham also wonders if perhaps too much emphasis was placed on the VVAW, especially in the Nixon years, as well as on that president's efforts to disrupt the anti-war movement in general as the key questions. He also wishes that Prados had spent more time with his footnotes, to make them more useful to readers, even as he acknowledges Prados’s use of newly available sources from Hanoi and Saigon. “Prados is at his best when discussing how many policy decisions in the Johnson years were based on a bad reading of history and a lot of wishful thinking.”

John Kuehn asserts that Prados appears to make a claim for the discovery of a “unified field theory” to explain “the various Vietnam wars from 1945 to 1975.” Prados believes, writes Kuehn, that Vietnam was the sort of war that “future historians might cite as the beginning of the end for this or that particular empire.” Thus he claims too much for one book. Kuehn is even more concerned than Brigham about the emphasis on the “war” on the VVAW as providing a key to understanding why the conflict was unique and unwinnable. He cites examples of actions against dissenters and supposedly potential disloyal citizens in wars that were won, such as FDR and the internment of Japanese-Americans. Despite Prados’s yeoman work in the various archives available to him, Kuehn writes, there are still many sources that are unavailable, and he fears that the book’s targeted audience will not understand that they are “looking through a glass darkly at partial images.” Moreover, Kuehn argues, if Prados wishes to stress the impact of the antiwar movement on political decisions, he should have investigated possible manipulations of that movement “by foreign powers,” if only “to further buttress the book’s claims.” “Instead of closing the debate,” Kuehn concludes, “Prados provides other interpretations plenty of room to continue the battle over the dominant narrative.”

Priscilla Roberts picks up the discussion at that very point, noting the emergence of these other interpretations that posit an alternative strategy, or, on a slightly different pitch, the argument that fighting the war was essential, even if victory finally eluded the efforts of the American military. She suggests that Prados’s book is best understood, therefore, as a product of the ongoing debates in the United States. His book, she argues, for all the research from archives outside the United States, is essentially about the American involvement, and is not the full-scale international study or synthesis that would attempt to incorporate all the new (and older) work on the war as seen from many perspectives. On the origins of American involvement, however, Roberts finds Prados insightful about the options facing Americans as the French struggled to maintain control of the fate of Vietnam. It was a trade off: French support for Marshall Plan aid to Germany for American willingness to cut Paris some slack in Southeast Asia.

Out of that original deal arose the essential tragedy of Vietnam that future American leaders from Eisenhower to Nixon could not escape. Eisenhower might have dumped Diem, Kennedy might have gotten out with the same ruthless aplomb that he demonstrated in dropping Marilyn Monroe, and so on. But she agrees with Prados that these scenarios are all improbable speculations. Roberts also remarks on Prados’s praise of certain
American military leaders, especially General Creighton Abrams, and the author's suggestion that post Tet military policy shifted, but too late to make a difference. This point is sure to be debated by other reviewers, for, even as Prados seems to lean a bit in that direction, he does not finally accept the “better war” thesis promulgated in recent years. At issue here is not only the question of whether a better war could have been waged earlier, but whether General Abrams actually did implement a truly different strategy.

Qiang Zhai is the most unreserved of the reviewers in declaring at the outset that this is the book on the war we have been waiting for, a comprehensive and sweeping analysis, grounded in painstaking research, and written by a historian at the height of his intellectual powers. He believes Prados has given a convincing demonstration that arguments about the supposed forsaken triumph in Vietnam are unsustainable. Zhai feels, however, that Prados has overlooked some important factors in the origins of the war that would have lent more strength to his conclusions, such as the connection between Vietnam policy in the Truman and Eisenhower years and the problem of Japan’s economic recovery. Zhai also observes that Prados does not consider the pressures mounted by the financial community after Tet on Lyndon Johnson’s decisions. In other words, for a book that stresses domestic issues on the Vietnam War, there are some questions that need more emphasis besides the antiwar movement.

The Vietnam War will no doubt continue to be a battleground for contested interpretations and suggestive comparisons with American foreign policy today. President George H.W. Bush boldly asserted after Gulf War I that the nation had kicked the Vietnam “syndrome.” However one interprets the meaning(s) of the Vietnam syndrome, that war is now being refought both by academics and generals on a number of levels. Because Prados engages so many of the issues of the war, Unwinnable War provides a good base line for where we are today in the debates that will shape future interpretations.

Participants:

John Prados is a senior fellow of the National Security Archive in Washington, DC. He holds a PhD in Political Science (International Relations) from Columbia University. Prados is author of five previous books on the Vietnam conflict, with significant coverage of Vietnam in five other works. Among his major books are Safe for Democracy: The Secret Wars of the CIA (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006); William Colby and the CIA (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009); The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War (New York: Wiley, 1999); Combined Fleet Decoded: The Secret History of U.S. Intelligence and the Japanese Navy in World War II (New York: Random House, 1995); The Hidden History of the Vietnam War; Valley of Decision: The Siege of Khe Sanh (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); Keepers of the Keys: A History of the National Security Council (New York: Morrow, 1991); and The Soviet Estimate: U.S. Intelligence and Soviet Strategic Forces (New York: Dial Press, 1982). Prados is currently exploring the terminal phase of the Cold War in How the Cold War Ended, a book that will both investigate a substantive case and instruct on the methodology of doing history, and working on a study of the Allied breakout from Normandy in World War II. He has several board games in progress, including one on the D-Day invasion, another on the Roman defeat at the Teutoburgerwald, and a third that deals with the
prewar preparations by Germany and the Soviet Union for the war between them that began in 1941.


Lloyd Gardner is Research Professor of History at Rutgers University, where he has taught since 1963. He received his Ph.D. at Wisconsin in 1960. He is a former president of SHAFR, and the author or editor of a dozen or so books including *Pay Any Price: Lyndon Johnson and the Wars for Vietnam* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1995); co-editor with Marilyn Young, of *Iraq and the Lessons of Vietnam and the New Empire* (New York: New Press, 2007); and *Long Road to Baghdad: A History of U.S. Foreign Policy from the 1970s to the Present* (New York: New Press, 2008). His new project is a book on the period that proceeds “Long Road to Baghdad,” which should be out this winter with the New Press.

Dr. John T. Kuehn is an Associate Professor of Military History at the U.S. Army’s Command and General Staff College (CGSC) in Fort Leavenworth, KS. He retired after 23 year as a naval aviator with the rank of commander in 2004. He was awarded a Ph.D. in History in 2007 by Kansas State University. He is also a distinguished graduate of the Naval Postgraduate School with a degree in Systems Engineering. He has published numerous articles, reviews, editorials, and two books—*Agents of Innovation* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2008) and *Eyewitness Pacific Theater* (Sterling Publishing, 2008) with
Dennis Giangreco. He is currently working on a paper to present to the Chief of Naval Operations Strategic Studies Group this October.

**Priscilla Roberts** received her B.A., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees from King’s College, Cambridge. She is an Associate Professor of History at the University of Hong Kong where she is also Honorary Director of the Centre of American Studies. She has edited the Chinese diaries of David Bruce, first head of the US Liaison Office in Beijing in 1973-1974, and the book *Behind the Bamboo Curtain: China, Vietnam, and the World Beyond Asia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006). Her research interests focus upon the development and influence of the US foreign policy elite. She is currently working on a biography of the banker Frank Altschul, and a study of the influence of Anglo-American think tanks on China policy.

**Qiang Zhai** is professor of history at Auburn University Montgomery. He received his doctoral degree from Ohio University, where he studied with John Lewis Gaddis. He is the author of *The Dragon, the Lion, and the Eagle: Chinese-British-American Relations, 1949-1958* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994), *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), as well as numerous articles and essays on Sino-American relations. He is a co-editor of *The Encyclopedia of the Cold War* (Routledge, 2008).
The author of several specialized studies on the Ho Chi Minh Trail and other key subjects, John Prados contends that one reason the Vietnam War continues to generate seemingly endless arguments is that the scholarship is “atomized” (xii)—narrow monographs debating small points—without adequate consideration of the long sweep of time and the role of all the various actors, especially America’s allies in South Vietnam. Consequently, he has produced a comprehensive chronicle that moves the narrative along quickly at times, scanning some ground much traveled by other writers, such as Johnson’s 1965 decisions to escalate U.S. military action in Vietnam and the presidential politics of 1968. He pauses to dig deeply into other subjects, however, such as the internal politics of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) and the inside workings of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). It is a long account that could easily have been longer, but it strikes a carefully considered balance between synthesis and details.

The book’s big-picture approach enables Prados to craft a convincing confirmation of the so-called orthodox interpretation that reflects the consensus of much of the scholarship that the American war was a predictable failure. His labeling of the war as “unwinnable” builds upon the work of many esteemed scholars such as George Herring, Robert Schulzinger, and Marilyn Young, whose surveys generally agree with the conclusion of a 1951 analysis for the Joint Chiefs of Staff that Indochina presented a policy dilemma “insolvable by military action.”¹ Herring has noted that the idea of the United States winning or not winning the war is basically unknowable because alternative “win” scenarios were not tried. In that regard, Prados’s thesis is boldly stated. His marshalling of extensive primary and secondary sources makes a compelling orthodox case that Washington’s Cold War strategy exaggerated the importance of Vietnam to U.S. security and that the endemic weaknesses of the pseudo-nation in South Vietnam made the notion of a Saigon victory ephemeral. In addition, he contends that many American military veterans, who suffered the stings of the war firsthand, and many other Americans, who suffered in various ways for protesting the war, understood the misbegotten nature of U.S. methods and objectives in Southeast Asia long before the presidents who held the power of life and death decisions for thousands of people.

The grainy details in parts of the book document well specific examples that support the “unwinnable” thesis, but they also capture the intensely human experience that is the foundation of all history and especially the history of wars. By providing the names and personal identification of individual U.S. soldiers, Vietnamese unit commanders, and

antiwar activists, for example, the global and historical generalizations are given life. Moreover, these details provide much that is new or not well-covered in other accounts about the deficiencies of the ARVN and the tenacity of the VVAW.

The book is thorough and compelling but not definitive, and that label may never be attached to a comprehensive account of the war. Revisionist historians, for example, who argue that the war was in some way winnable for the United States, will likely continue to envision alternate endings of the war other than that which in fact occurred. Prados effectively engages these scholars in his endnotes, although he labels them “neo-orthodox” (328) rather than revisionist. His terminology recalls early Cold War historiography that labeled studies supportive of the government’s containment policy as orthodox and scholarship critical of American policy as revisionist. Most of Prados’s points of interpretation are what would now be called orthodox—that Washington’s containment paradigm was not suited to Vietnam—and will find resonance with the work of many historians. Even within the current orthodox school, however, there remains room for disagreement. Prados invokes, for example, a marvelous use of the well-known “tunnel” metaphor when he says that President Dwight Eisenhower “entered the dark tunnel to the Vietnam conflict” (25) in 1954 by linking U.S. global interest to Vietnam during the final days of the French war as Paris’s colonial forces met defeat at Dien Bien Phu. That Eisenhower shares with Harry Truman, who preceded him, and John Kennedy, who followed him, responsibility for making a flawed application of America’s Cold War containment strategy to Indochina will find broad support. There is no question that Eisenhower’s wholehearted backing of President Ngo Dinh Diem against the challenge of the Vietnamese Communists greatly narrowed U.S. policy options toward South Vietnam. To say, however, as Prados does, that “Vietnam acquired inevitability” (31) under Eisenhower from 1954 to 1960 overstates the case. He is perceptive to argue that Dien Bien Phu remained a critical point of reference for leaders in both the United States and Vietnam throughout the American war, but there is considerable evidence that Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson continued to have many available options in Vietnam short of war and had considerable agency in determining the course of the American war.

Specialists are going to find in this volume a treasure trove of provocative and well-argued commentaries on much that has been written about the war. To cite just a few examples, Prados pointedly disagrees with such authors as H. R. McMaster, Gareth Porter, Harry Summers, William Colby, and Lewis Sorley (107-8, 262,328). He provides a rebuttal to the “conservative modernizer” characterization of Diem that some historians have developed from Vietnamese language sources on the Republic of Vietnam (68). His comprehensive analysis also leads him to explicit agreement with other writers, such as Herring on the Geneva Conference and Jeffrey Kimball on Nixon’s policies (30, 488). The book’s valuable bibliographic essay is an expert digest of the vast amount of interpretation now available on so many topics.

Portions of this book depart from history as explanation and are cast as memoir or history as experience. This work does not have the journalistic detachment of Stanley Karnow’s narrative history, which is still a model account of what was one of the major wars of the twentieth century. Prados’s Vietnam is not autobiographical to the degree of Todd Gitlin’s
great survey of the 1960s, but he steps aside at times to describe what he was doing and thinking in the 1960s and 1970s as a young American increasingly questioning the motives and conduct of his country’s leaders. These passages have an intimacy and an “I was there” authority that are unconventional for a work of scholarly synthesis. There are other references, often in the notes, in which the author draws attention to his own publications and professional activities in an unusually self-conscious manner. Such departures in form expose his otherwise strong, evidence-based claims to the risk of being idiosyncratic and open to challenge from readers who may have had different personal experiences. His upfront acknowledgement of his insertion of himself into the analysis in “A Note to the Reader” is to be commended but does not mitigate the considerable risk he has taken. The Vietnam veteran novelist Tim O’Brien has reflected on “How to Tell a War Story” in his collection of short stories, The Things They Carried (1991) and cautions that the retelling of personal events does not always distinguish between what happened and what seemed to happen. Reading Prados’s book is akin to having a conversation with the author with a combination of historical explanation and participant anecdote. For a great novelist like O’Brien and an accomplished chronicler like Prados, the goal is to provide the reader with an emotional substance that is somehow another level of truth than just the objective account of archive-based research.

To give the book both color and impact, Prados fills it with many specific references to individuals, places, military units, and vivid details. He has done an amazing job of avoiding factual errors among these many small details. One mistake must be noted, however, since this reviewer is a member of the Fort Ord Alumni Association. Fort Ord, California (not Washington, see 350), was the location of VOLAR, or the U.S. Army’s program for transition to the all-volunteer army.

At several points, Prados draws explicit parallels between the Vietnam War and the Iraq War. For example, he quotes with effect Robert McNamara’s reflection on South Vietnam that military force “cannot bring order in a country that cannot govern itself” (211). On another occasion he notes that Lyndon Johnson in 1967 and George W. Bush in 2007 consciously resisted exit strategies presented to them by advisers. Prados deems the parallel of presidential policy making in Vietnam and Iraq “uncommonly apt” (549), and most historians of the Vietnam War would agree that the Indochina conflict remains a conceptual model for American policy makers to heed seriously today. Overall, the book is a grand and important work of synthesis by a diligent and engaged scholar with telling insights gained from his years of reflection on a vast and complex subject. Prados’s Vietnam is a welcome addition to the literature on the war.
John Prados (PhD, Columbia) has written over fifteen books, most of them dealing with the Vietnam War, American foreign policy, or U.S. intelligence operations. He has earned a reputation as a diligent scholar who has a penchant for finding material that has not been sufficiently analyzed by others. Among Prados’s most influential works are *The Hidden History of the Vietnam War* and *The Blood Road: The Ho Chi Minh Trail and the Vietnam War*; both of these books focus on lesser-known aspects of the war. With the publication of *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War*, Prados joins a long list of scholars who have written standard narratives on America’s longest war. What separates this work from most previous studies, however, is Prados’s continuing gift for originality and his ability to plumb the depths of the available records.

A major theme running throughout Prados’s new look at the Vietnam War is the impact of the anti-war movement, especially Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), on the formulation and implementation of U.S. policy. Prados even begins his book with the now-famous VVAW march on Washington in April 1971. He suggests that this unique moment in history, when returning veterans marched on Washington, D.C. over matters of U.S. foreign policy, can only be understood by examining the war in full. For Prados, then, a fundamental question about the Vietnam War is how did this conflict tear the social and moral fabric of the country so completely as to pit the government against a group of veterans?

In painstaking detail that is still fresh and innovative, Prados tells his story of the Vietnam War, beginning with Franklin Roosevelt and his trusteeship proposal for Indochina, and ending with the Fall of Saigon in April 1975. Along the way, we are treated to Prados’s unique vision of policy mistakes and failures. Among the strongest chapters in this book is the treatment of the immediate post Geneva period, 1954-1960. Prados is particularly adept at sorting out the various positions on Vietnam inside the national security bureaucracy in Washington and in Congress. His discussion of the relationship between Eisenhower and Senator Mike Mansfield, a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee and an Asian specialist, is fascinating. Prados also follows developments in Vietnam during this period, taking advantage of newly translated source material from Hanoi and Saigon. Prados is painting with broad brush strokes here, and it is done to good effect.

Perhaps most interesting are the chapters focusing on the Kennedy and Johnson administrations. Prados clearly shows that the attempt by these administrations to keep their options open in Vietnam actually led to a narrowing of future choices. Prados is particularly good on Kennedy’s counterinsurgency program, suggesting that it was neither fully ignored by the military command in Vietnam nor fully developed inside the White House. According to Prados, vague discussions with General Edward Lansdale about the political war in South Vietnam never led to a comprehensive strategy that allowed the Saigon government to consolidate its power or assume responsibility for the public welfare. Prados is at his best when discussing how many policy decisions in the Johnson years were based on a bad reading of history and a lot of wishful thinking.
Some readers will quibble with Prados over his treatment of the Nixon years. Policy decisions in 1970 and 1971 at times seem overwhelmed by domestic events. The invasion of Cambodia and the later incursions into Laos are seen largely through the VVAW lens, and this, I think, will distract some readers. Should Prados have told this part of the story without so much emphasis on VVAW? Perhaps, but then maybe it would not be the history he wanted to focus upon. For sure, Prados does seem to spend an inordinate amount of time on the Nixon administration and COINTELPRO’s efforts to discredit and disrupt the anti-war movement. Perhaps this topic is worthy of a lengthy monograph penned by Prados?

My only major criticism of this book comes from Prados’s use—or better yet, lack of use—of footnotes. In a well documented book, I found it frustrating that Prados would often refer to “records of Washington’s internal deliberations...” (p. 266) or state that “Vietnamese sources indicate...“ (p. 192) without a proper reference. I have no doubt that he fairly and accurately describes decisions and conversations, but the teacher in me wants my students to be able to go to the original source, even if this means lengthy footnotes and more work for the author.

The teacher in me is also sure that students will benefit greatly from spending time with this book. It is fresh, original, and a terrific read.
John Prados, senior fellow at the National Security Archive at George Washington University, claims to have accomplished in his chosen field, history, what Albert Einstein could not in his—the discovery of a “unified field theory” to explain the various Vietnam wars from 1945 to 1975 (p. xiii). As with most provocative books, the major title supports this approach--the unitary noun ‘Vietnam.’ There is a great deal of room for movement in that lonely formal noun. The book’s subtitle, though, encapsulates the major argument that the war was unwinnable; it also contains a secondary argument, which Prados discusses in the preface, implying that this is a definitive history (“unified field theory”) of “…Vietnam an unwinnable war.” (xiii and xv) And not just any lost war, but that unique war that future historians might cite as the beginning of the end for this or that particular empire.

Objectivity has merits. Hyperbole often does not. Prados dispenses with much of the former as his first order of business, in his opening discussion of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) and their march in April of 1971. At the end of this vignette he claims: “Never in the history in the history of the United States had a government conducted political warfare against its own citizens.” (p.12) American historians and their students might have cause to consult John Adams and the Alien and Sedition Acts, any number of actions by Abraham Lincoln, and, more recently, FDR’s policies vis-à-vis Japanese-American citizens after World War II. That said, Prados’s claim that much of the history on the Vietnam War is “atomized” has much truth to it. First, he does give oblique kudos to the scholars who have preceded him as the “atoms” themselves (xii). More direct discussion is available in smaller font at the back of the book in a highly personal bibliographic essay. (613) The atoms are certainly too numerous to list, even the ones that approach the unified field status that Prados seeks—A.J. Languth’s Our Vietnam comes to mind as does George Herring’s America’s Longest War. Also, some of the more recent atoms are very finely crafted indeed and address some of Prados’s concerns about neglected areas in the war -- from Mark Moyar’s revisionist Triumph Forsaken (much of which this book claims to refute) to the recent work of Andy Weist and James Willbanks. However, Prados overstates his major historiographic point. Certainly Arthur J. Dommen’s comprehensive and laboriously documented The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans captures and integrates many of the atomic particles into a sort of molecular whole.¹ And what of the dialectical yin and yang of Jeffrey Record’s much shorter The Wrong War or even William F. Lind’s contrarian effort in The Necessary War? The recurring VVAW narrative perhaps edged out more extended discussions of Cambodia and Laos -- countries whose sovereignty was repeatedly violated by Hanoi as much as by the United States and South Vietnam. As for a complete discussion of China’s role, that would require the sub-title to change to 1979. It seems clear that Prados is pretty much correct in saying that it

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cannot all be gathered comfortably under one roof. Nonetheless, Prados’s effort effectively ends in 1973; he gives a mere 18 pages in a 550 word narrative to the final two years of the war.

To be fair, Prados’s determinism starts out fuzzy and becomes more constricted and certain as the conflict lurches forward in time, like a broad funnel that tapers into a narrow exit spilling Soviet-built tanks down the broad leafy avenues of Saigon. This reviewer found the experience, notwithstanding the discussion above, readable. After all, in searching for universal truths we often discover the more important particular ones. To that end, the opening of the complete transcripts of the White House tapes provides fruitful ground for revisiting the conclusions that were written absent them. Also, the Freedom of Information Act and the opening of more and more classified archives (of which Prados is the acknowledged master) also dictate new scholarship. Here Prados does yeoman’s work, building on his previous research on the CIA and national intelligence organizations. On the other hand, his exploitation of his own anecdotal involvement in anti-war activism as a means to highlight the wrongheadedness of American policy-making and execution has more minuses than pluses.

All historical work must examine all sides and the Vietnam War offers a special challenge because there were so many “sides.” The Russian archives, for example, seem to be closing again and the opportunity to understand more fully their stance and policy decisions may have passed as bureaucrats in Russia put limits on archival access. China is more open, but again there are archives and records, one imagines, that are not fully available in that semi-closed polity. The best new fields for scholarship on the other side are in the countries of Indochina, but the key archives in Vietnam—already muddied by Marxist deterministic writing—are still very much a closed closet. Kampuchea and Laos are more promising and open, but the language and sheer geographical challenges are daunting. As with most post-conflict archives, there is probably much that has been lost forever through destruction, neglect, and violence. The result is what we always get from histories, looking through a glass darkly at partial images. Does the audience Prados targets realize these shortcomings as regards history? I suspect most of them do not. After all, one presumes his book is meant to be the baby-boom generation’s definitive interpretation.

There are puzzling aspects to the book’s structure. For example, given Prados’s goal of a broad unifying synthesis he lets the reader clearly know in his preface that he intends to examine more closely the highly political issue of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), commenting that it has received only a “bit part” in other histories (xiv). If ever there was an atomic issue this one is it. However, the constant reference to anecdotal evidence, especially later in the book, struck this reviewer as narcissistic in some cases and occasionally undermined the power of Prados’s more objective passages (e.g. pp. 536-537). Why give the reader the sense that examination of this issue is one of the interpretive pillars of the book, why not just narrate the story and then analyze its significance in a larger context? Prados makes a good case that the political aspects of the antiwar movement affected the most important audience of all -- American political leaders. However, he seems to ignore the plethora of good scholarship that strongly suggests that most Americans tired of the war prior to Tet and in spite of, rather than because of, the
antiwar movement. This reviewer tends to the opinion that the perceptions of American political leadership counted most because it made the immediate policy decisions.

Prados, despite nods toward criticisms of Hanoi (p. 65), misses the mark in presenting an objective and complete account of the other side of the hill. The concept of Dau Tranh (Struggle) -- with both its armed and political aspects, which Douglas Pike and others have articulated so well, is neglected (only one passing mention in the entire book) as is an examination of Soviet political action inside the antiwar movement. If the antiwar movement is indeed an interpretative pillar, the role -- however limited or minimal -- of its manipulation by foreign powers (and as encouraged by the writings of Mao, Lenin, and Trotsky) should be more thoroughly examined, if only to further buttress the book's claims. Hanoi's strategic errors, in 1964-65, 1968-69, and 1972 are glossed over, too. If the hope was to end the war, North Vietnamese failures to end it early, failures that caused even more bloodshed and death, should be criticized as well. Similarly, Watergate gets little discussion as to its impact on the final two years of the war. I realize that Prados's logic has led us to a straightjacket of determinism by 1973, but to ignore the topic and its impact—especially when he claims that the U.S. was still outspending the Soviet Union and China in supporting the Thieu government after Paris, comes across as disingenuous. A unified field theory should always account for anomalies and codicils. Instead of closing the debate, Prados provides other interpretations plenty of room to continue the battle over the dominant narrative.

Vietnam delivers its narrative through an angry lens but with a scholarly mastery of a vast body of secondary literature and new primary source data. The book is very much an attempt to reclaim a “traditional” narrative for the war. One way to do this is to dismiss the need for any further debate: "The debate is past and ultimately sterile." (p. 546) This demarche limits the possibility that much of the goodness of the study can serve as a departure point for future scholarship. Motivation must be taken into account along with experience, and the motivation here is Prados’s Iraq. And Prados hits pay dirt in emphasizing that the focus on Iraq has distracted all of us from the better Vietnam analogy -- a forgotten, now un-winnable, “little” war going down the tubes in Afghanistan.

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2 William M. Hammond, "The Tet Offensive and the News Media," Army History Winter 2009, 6-16. Hammond supports Prados’s other contention that the American News Media did not "lose" the war in turning Americans against it; they had already turned well before Tet.

The wars to unify Vietnam under a nationalist-Communist government lasted for thirty years, and in one form or another involved all the world's major and many other powers. For many Americans who were politically active or cut their political teeth in the 1960s, however, the wars over Vietnam are still continuing. A goodly number of the officials who were responsible for the American decisions on Vietnam never really escaped from its shadow. The brothers William P. and McGeorge Bundy, both implicated in many of the decisions to escalate American commitments to Vietnam, each spent years of their lives writing lengthy memoirs on Vietnam that they found it impossible to complete. Robert McNamara, Lyndon B. Johnson's Secretary of Defense, provoked a firestorm of criticism when he finally published a memoir describing his own part in broadening the war, since many of his antiwar opponents charged that he was still insufficiently repentant and had not shown adequate contrition for his role in the conflict. Debates over what politicians running for office had or had not done during the Vietnam War were a notable feature of the presidential elections of 1992 and 2004, and to a lesser extent that of 2000.

Refighting the war has become an equally popular pursuit. In recent years, civilian and military officials involved in Vietnam have claimed that, if only their military operations had not been limited financially and in terms of tactics and manpower by domestic political constraints in the United States, the war could have been won. Others, including President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, who negotiated the 1973 Paris Peace Accords, claim that the war was actually won by that time, and that it was only the failure of the United States Congress to provide adequate additional aid and support in the following two years that allowed the North to mount a successful invasion in 1975. Michael B. Lind, for example, argued that the Vietnam War was in fact a “necessary war,” with escalation in 1965-1966 needed to preserve the credibility of the United States as a superpower. By 1968, however, American de-escalation and withdrawal had become essential in order to maintain the American domestic political consensus in favor of the Cold War. In this respect, Lind differed from those historians who argued that victory could have been attained had it not been for the political constraints upon all-out military action in Vietnam. Throughout his life Walt W. Rostow, Lyndon B. Johnson’s national security adviser, argued that the Vietnam war had been successful, insofar as it gained time for other Southeast Asian nations to strengthen themselves sufficiently to resist further communist expansion. Seeking to wrest victory from the jaws of defeat, he further contended that this very outcome, effectively preventing the fall of the various abutting dominoes, had always been the real objective of American policymakers.

John Prados’s massive new tome reflects and is very much the product of these ongoing debates in the United States. Although it draws on recent scholarship on the international implications of the Vietnam War and newly declassified documents from outside the United States, fundamentally this is a history of American involvement in Vietnam. It is, moreover,

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deeply personal in tone. Prados himself was a participant in some of the events that he recounts. He came from a family with strong military connections, and until 1968 had himself intended to enroll in West Point Military Academy, but the events of that year raised doubts in his mind that sufficed to change his plans. Instead, he became an undergraduate at Columbia University. Interspersed in this volume are accounts of Prados's own involvement from 1968 onward in the anti-war Movement (always capitalized by him), an association that led him to participate in numerous demonstrations, counsel draftees, and campaign fervently for George McGovern in New York City in 1972. Prados also designed a popular board war game on the early years of the Vietnam War, when France was still the dominant colonial power, and attracted highly intrusive surveillance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation and other American government agencies, to the extent that his apartment was burglarized. Prados's own experience of the impact of the Vietnam War upon the United States means that the book is somewhat unbalanced, with about half its space devoted to the period from late 1968 onward, when Richard Nixon was elected president, in part due to his claims that he had a secret plan to end the war expeditiously.

Prados is a highly respected historian of American strategic, military, diplomatic, and national security policies, with fifteen well regarded books, several of which have focused entirely or partly on Vietnam, to his credit. These include studies of the never implemented American bombing plans of 1954, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the siege of Khe Sanh, in 1967-1968, a volume focusing on the “hidden history” of the Vietnam War, and another on the Pentagon Papers. Prados's books are invariably extremely well researched, and for almost three decades he has been tireless in his efforts to force the United States government to declassify once secret documents not just on Vietnam but on many other episodes of American diplomacy involving covert operations. Few, if any, historians are more familiar with the shadowy hinterland of surreptitious or unacknowledged enterprises that were undertaken to bolster and implement official United States Cold War policies.

The literature on the Vietnam War is vast and ever expanding. As Prados himself says, a new synthetic history of the Vietnam War, incorporating all aspects, diplomatic, military, and strategic, as well as domestic political concerns, is needed. George Herring, still the standard textbook, is very much an account of United States involvement in Vietnam. The excellent new concise international history by Mark Atwood Lawrence is relatively brief. Older one-volume histories by Stanley Karnow and Michael Maclear were published a

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quarter of a century ago. The late Ralph B. Smith’s international history of the war reached its third volume in 1991, but only covers the conflict to 1966. In the past two to three decades, huge swathes of documents have been declassified in the United States, and massive amounts of once-closed material have become available from British, European, Australian, Russian, East European, Chinese, Vietnamese, and other archives. Thousands of new books and articles have appeared, deploying new materials and in many cases challenging accepted orthodoxies on the war. There is room for a new fullscale study of the Vietnam War, one that would incorporate and address all the new material and scholarship at some length.

Prados’s new volume is not such a study. Rather than being a comprehensive account of the war, it attempts to meld together the course of diplomatic and military events in an effort to understand how the United States became involved in Vietnam, why that commitment continued and expanded, and why it took so long for the United States to disengage itself from Vietnam. He makes extensive and extremely detailed use of much of the new material that has become available in recent years, and takes issue with many of the more recent revisionist or neo-orthodox accounts of the war, particularly those that claim that an American victory was either attainable or had actually been achieved. These works usually place the responsibility for Vietnam’s ultimate defeat on a the baneful influence of some combination of American politicians, either in Congress or the various presidential administrations, war protesters, the media, and—in some cases—the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Prados’s greatest preoccupation is to deploy newly released documentary materials to discredit such claims, and to bolster the case that the war in Vietnam was, as stated in the book’s title, “unwinnable.” This is not a book for those seeking an overarching introduction to the Vietnam War. Although massively researched in both primary sources and the secondary literature, much of this volume reads as if effectively designed for a specialist audience, one already thoroughly familiar with the existing debates and scholarship upon the conflict in Vietnam, seeking enlightenment upon those questions and assertions about the war that have been raised and become prominent over the past two decades. Perhaps unconsciously, it assumes a fairly detailed knowledge of the historiography on and arguments over the war most likely to be found either among military and diplomatic historians, or in the ranks of those who, more than thirty years on, find it almost impossible to escape from the long tendrils of memory, and are still reliving and refighting the 1960s and 1970s.

The result is a book that, especially in its first half, is somewhat episodic, concentrating particularly on those moments when, Prados believes, American leaders had the option of either refusing to become involved in the affairs of Vietnam, or extricating the United States from deeper embroilment, but failed to do so. The book tends to take it for granted that the reader is already familiar with many of the leading personalities, especially the various American presidents and their top officials, and also with much of the background of the

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period. Prados is insightful about how the United States gradually boosted its commitment to France’s recovery and retention of Indochina over a decade, beginning in 1945, and effectively traded French control of the colony for French support of Marshall Plan aid to West Germany and German membership of NATO. He omits, however, discussion of an interesting parallel, the Netherlands East Indies (present-day Indonesia), where American diplomats came to view the Dutch colonial masters as unpopular and ineffective, and the United States pressured the Dutch to withdraw in 1948-1949, threatening to withdraw Marshall aid unless they did so. At least some U.S. officials in post-1945 Vietnam were equally sympathetic to the Vietnamese nationalist forces headed by Ho Chi Minh. Was the crucial difference between the two countries the fact that France was larger and in a position to exert greater influence in European affairs, or was it that the Viet Minh were avowedly communist?

President Dwight D. Eisenhower, Vice President Richard Nixon, and Lyndon B. Johnson, then Senate minority leader, are all portrayed as eager to employ airpower at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, restrained largely by congressional misgivings and British reluctance to participate, and also by Matthew B. Ridgway, chief of staff of the U.S. army, who made it clear that, without continued French willingness to fight, in practical and logistical terms American military intervention was a non-starter. The Eisenhower administration, after the negotiation of the Geneva Accords of 1954, which it refused to accept, then took the initiative in making South Vietnam an American client state, headed by an authoritarian and remote figure, the Catholic former exile President Ngo Dinh Diem, over whose actions American officials found themselves able to exercise very little control. For twenty years, in Prados’s account, South Vietnam would be headed by aloof leaders who treated the country as a personal fiefdom, favored their own political allies in the armed forces and civilian government alike, used the governmental machinery of countersubversion to persecute and eliminate their political foes, proved ineffective in introducing reforms to counter the appeal of the communist National Liberation Front, and rigged the electoral process. Prados devotes considerable attention to the policies and weaknesses of the South Vietnamese government in both the political and military spheres, deficiencies that he argues American leaders tolerated, even if reluctantly. These shortcomings ultimately meant that attaining a South Vietnamese victory in the war, with or without American assistance, became impossible. Prados implies that the domestic outlook in South Vietnam might have improved, had Eisenhower been willing to jettison Diem in 1954-1956, when he faced significant opposition from Buddhist sects and others, but one wonders just how feasible an alternative such an American switch of horses might have been. Would any American-backed South Vietnamese government have been able to match the legitimacy of the Northern nationalists, or to justify the cancellation of the countrywide elections scheduled for 1956?

Coverage of the Kennedy presidency is rather sketchy. There is, for example, no mention of Eisenhower’s warning to Kennedy that, even after he left office, he would publicly oppose any effort by Kennedy to abandon Vietnam. Nor of accounts of Kennedy, feeling bruised after his first encounter with Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev at Vienna in June 1961, pointing to Vietnam as the spot on the map where he could forcefully demonstrate his own and American toughness to his Russian opponent. Prados rightly takes issue with those
former Kennedy administration officials and historians who have claimed that Kennedy definitely intended to withdraw American troops from Vietnam once the 1964 election was behind him. Such surmises seem to owe as much to hagiography as to history, burnishing the myth that, had Kennedy lived, the United States would have avoided the brutally divisive social conflicts of the later 1960s. As Prados points out, it is far from clear whether Kennedy’s suggestions that he might reduce American troop levels in Vietnam were genuine or merely an effort to pressure the obdurate President Diem, who was increasingly in jeopardy as planning for a military coup against him intensified, to abandon repressive policies, make concessions to his opponents, exile his unpopular brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, and introduce reforms. It would have been extremely difficult for the United States to sanction a coup against Diem, as it did in fall 1963, and then abandon the new regime without giving Diem’s replacements the chance to prove that nothing succeeds like successors. A projected long-term withdrawal schedule drawn up by Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara in June 1962—after which American forces in Vietnam increased by more than fifty percent over the following year, from 9,000 to 15,400—was predicated on American successes there and leaving a residual U.S. force in Vietnam for at least another five years. NSAM-273, prepared in draft in the last two days of Kennedy’s presidency and approved by his successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, set up a new, American-directed and implemented action program for Vietnam. It is entirely possible that Kennedy, a less emotional and more skeptical personality than Johnson, might eventually, had he lived, have decided that the United States was batting on a losing wicket in Vietnam, arranged a face-saving settlement, and cut his losses there with much the same ruthless aplomb he showed in dropping Marilyn Monroe. But such scenarios lie in the realm of speculation, not history.

When Kennedy ran for office in 1960, Vietnam was still so low on the scale of American priorities that it received no mention whatever in the journalist Theodore H. White’s classic account of that campaign, *The Making of the President 1960*. Three years later, when Kennedy was assassinated, the country had become a vexing and perplexing foreign policy problem for the United States, with a sizeable contingent of American military and covert forces there making less progress than might have been desired. Yet in late 1963, American involvement in Vietnam was still not massively disproportionate to U.S. commitments elsewhere. The major decisions to escalate, first to begin large-scale bombing operations, and then to send ever growing numbers of ground forces, were made on Lyndon B. Johnson’s watch. Prados portrays Johnson—and several of his chief advisers—oscillating between caution and the belief that applying greater military force would persuade the North and the National Liberation Front to fold their hand and cease their efforts to destabilize South Vietnam. He joins several recent historians in placing the responsibility for expanding the war firmly upon Lyndon B. Johnson, who—despite giving genuine and perhaps conflicted consideration to the opposing arguments eloquently stated by Under Secretary of State George Ball—ultimately always came down on the side of upping the ante. The possibility of neutralizing all of Indochina, which officials in Saigon were ready to consider at intervals during 1964, was always rejected, in favor of military options. The president went into the war with eyes wide shut. In Prados’s view: “Johnson might have been ambivalent or even deeply troubled about Vietnam, but he was a proud
man and not about to run from a fight, whether he perceived it accurately or not. LBJ was not mouse trapped into Vietnam. He marched into war, head held high.” (p. 114)

Johnson may have wavered at times, but when key decisions faced him, until March 1968 he invariably chose more rather than less. There are indications that, even after he had announced his decision not to seek re-election and to open negotiations with Vietnam, had LBJ had his druthers he might have reversed course. He would apparently have welcomed a draft at the 1968 Democratic convention, and during the campaign, he met with Richard Nixon, the Republican candidate, and may even have tacitly encouraged the man running against Hubert Humphrey, his vice-president and a liberal who genuinely favored peace, to take a hard line on Vietnam. At the same time, Johnson did display a vein of practical caution. He was always leery of raising the game against North Vietnam to a level of intensity that might trigger intervention by the Soviet Union, communist China, or both. While some historians, as well as military men, have charged that the tactical and strategic restraints on operations against North Vietnam that such apprehensions on the part of American leaders forced them to observe made the difference between defeat and victory for the United States in the war, Prados thinks Johnson justified in seeking to avoid intervention by one of the major Communist powers. He mentions the long-lasting psychological impact on Johnson of the siege of Dien Bien Phu, when as a senator he would have backed U.S. bombing. Interestingly, he fails to mention events that may have had at least as great an impact on Johnson and other policymakers: the memory of November 1950, when the People’s Republic of China, despite the confidence of General Douglas MacArthur and CIA analysts that it would not enter the Korean War, came in with “volunteer” forces, troops who almost drove American and South Korean forces into the sea, and whose intervention ensured that almost three years later the Korean War ended in a stalemate armistice. China and the Soviet Union, locked in a contest for leadership of the communist world, undoubtedly had domestic problems and preoccupations of their own, but if pushed far enough might still have chosen to enter the war to assist their ally and client, North Vietnam, in a situation where United States pressure had become intolerable. At the 1967 Glassboro Summit between Johnson and Soviet Prime Minister Alexei Kosygin, ambassador at large W. Averell Harriman assured the Soviets that the United States would not invade North Vietnam or employ tactical nuclear weapons in the war. Prados might also have mentioned quiet signaling between China and the United States, documented by Chen Jian and James Hershberg, that took place during the Johnson administration, with the objective of limiting the expansion of the war and maintaining some kind of equilibrium in hostilities. Even if the boundaries to be observed were by no means entirely clear, neither the Johnson administration nor President Richard Nixon could ever be confident that invading North Vietnam, or overly aggressive measures against the North, would not invite Soviet or Chinese retaliation and trigger World War III, which might easily escalate into a fullscale nuclear conflict. In the years following the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis, when a relatively routine confrontation between the United States and an irritating small communist state suddenly came close to spiraling into nuclear exchanges between the superpowers, such fears were far from negligible, and were ever-present in the thinking of American policymakers.
While deeply critical of many of Johnson’s policies, including his willingness to break the law and use government agencies to spy on, harass, and discredit domestic opponents of the war, Prados has some sympathy for a conflicted president whose last years in office became a torment for him, making him a virtual prisoner in the White House. He reserves his strongest condemnation, as well as almost half the volume, for the Nixon administration, finding few if any redeeming features in the personalities and policies of Nixon and Henry Kissinger, the dominating national security adviser who ultimately became Secretary of State. Nixon and Kissinger, Prados charges, sought to escalate and widen the war by bombing North Vietnamese sanctuaries and supply bases in both Cambodia and Laos, even as they claimed to be seeking peace and drew down American troop levels in South Vietnam. Their efforts to win victory before signing a peace settlement cost 20,000 additional American lives and inflicted untold additional misery not just on Vietnam, but on the rest of Indochina, destabilizing the fragile equilibrium that had previously existed in both Cambodia and Laos. In Prados’s view, the two men were not, as some of their critics have alleged, simply seeking a “decent interval” in Vietnam to allow American troops to withdraw and Nixon to declare “peace with honor,” before North Vietnam finally took over the South: until at least some time in 1972, their true objective was—as American policy had been ever since 1954—to force the North to accept the independent existence of South Vietnam. The conditions on which the parties to the war finally agreed, as congressional and public support for the war in the United States disintegrated and ever more American units left Vietnam, were no better than the peace terms that could have been reached four years earlier.

Prados, who once contemplated joining the U.S. Army and is a fine military historian, has great respect for American combat units and their accomplishments. He also defends Johnson’s Joint Chiefs of Staff against well-publicized suggestions that they were in “dereliction of duty” for not insisting to the president that, unless the war in Vietnam was fought with no holds barred in terms of taking the war to North Vietnam, the United States should not commit ground forces there. If the Joint Chiefs were less than prescient and sometimes over-optimistic, they were, Prados argues, no more at fault than their civilian masters within the administration, who ultimately called the shots on policy. Disputing suggestions that the Tet offensive represented simply a major defeat for North Vietnamese forces, Prados points out that, even though failures in coordination meant that Northern units were unable to achieve all the successes they had hoped for, and were eventually beaten back, North Vietnam was still able to mount two further drives in 1968. Prados discounts claims by retired military officers that more extensive bombing of North Vietnam, or the freedom to invade the North, would have forced the enemy to capitulate and acquiesce in the continued existence of a non-communist state in the South. So long as the Southern government remained weak militarily, with a narrow base of political support, Prados assesses its chances of long-term survival, even with extensive American economic and military aid, as slim at best. For whatever reason, U.S. officials never succeeded in locating a dynamic South Vietnamese leader who enjoyed a strong base of popular support and had the ability to unite the disparate political groupings in his country behind him. Perhaps none existed, with the forces of anti-colonial nationalism in Indochina boosting the legitimacy of Ho Chi Minh’s communist forces.
Prados criticizes much of the military reporting on progress in the war, which exaggerated American successes and, wittingly or not, frequently massaged statistics to tell military and civilian officials in Washington what they wanted to hear. General William Westmoreland, even if not complicit in falsifying data, was probably too ready to give credit to those figures that presented the most attractive and comforting scenario of progress. While harboring reservations as to Westmoreland's command skills, Prados nonetheless commends his logistical accomplishments, in terms of creating the infrastructure necessary to support the movement and basing of large numbers of American troops in South Vietnam. Prados does, however, have high praise for General Creighton Abrams, who took over as American commander after the Tet offensive and devoted great efforts to genuine implementation of the pacification program, designed to win the loyalties of rural settlements in Vietnam. Prados suggests that, ultimately, the efforts of Abrams and CIA operative William Colby to implement pacification came too late, because North Vietnam switched its efforts from guerrilla activities to conventional warfare, but he clearly admires Abrams' abilities in this sphere and as a field commander.

In the United States, the Vietnam War became the most socially divisive conflict since the American Civil War a century earlier. Significantly, Prados takes almost all his chapter titles from the hauntingly evocative Battle Hymn of the Republic, the Civil War anthem of the Northern, anti-slavery forces. In counterpoint with the story of the decisions by successive American presidents to become involved in South Vietnam and expand U.S. involvement there, Prados recounts and weaves in the growth and impact of the anti-war movement in the United States, focusing upon one particular group, Vietnam Veterans Against the War, in which future Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts was prominent. His heart was and remains with the Movement, all those Americans who tried to reverse their country’s policies in Vietnam and end the American contribution to the war. These sympathies may lead him to overestimate the impact of the anti-war movement and underplay the growing strength of conservatism in the United States during the Nixon presidency, a long-term development that Nixon undoubtedly sought to facilitate, with considerable success. Prados also views American reactions to the Vietnam War very much in terms of its place in a lengthy tradition of democratic political protest against all kinds of social injustice in the United States. This is decidedly an American book, written by a highly accomplished author from a peculiarly American perspective, in many ways part of the still continuing and often heated dialogue on the Vietnam War by the generation for whom it was and will always remain one of their most important formative experiences.

Throughout this volume, Prados draws explicit references and comparisons to American intervention in Iraq in 2003 and its consequences, and the measures taken by the administration of George W. Bush to suppress domestic dissent. From the time that the United States chose to embark on hostilities in Iraq, diplomatic historians in the United States discussed almost obsessively the parallels between the two conflicts. By the time this book appeared in print, however, the situation in Iraq had stabilized, and Western forces were handing over their facilities to Iraqi units and had embarked on a path to complete withdrawal within the foreseeable future. By now, though, there appear to be equally if not more striking analogies to the situation in Afghanistan, a remote country with a long history of outside intervention by greater powers, divided among warring factions.
and ethnic groups, where NATO forces headed by the United States currently seem to be at best maintaining a stalemated position. An aloof westernized president, who only controls part of the country, and whose closest adviser seems to be his brother, has recently won an election which has given rise to what appear to be credible claims of massive fraud and ballot-stuffing by the incumbent. Military forces opposed to the government can take sanctuary in remote fastnesses in neighboring states, while the United States and its allies try to keep their own casualties low by using high-technology predator drones and other remotely controlled weapons against them. Western forces are seeking not only to attain military victory, but also to institute political, economic, and social reforms that will ensure domestic stability within Afghanistan. The American commander has just requested a major increase in troop levels, to overcome military opposition and bring the country to a state where the implementation of reformist measures is possible. Meanwhile, American allies are becoming increasingly restive as casualty figures continue to mount, and influential British commentators have published articles in respected conservative newspapers suggesting that Afghanistan is not in itself crucial to Western security, and a military withdrawal would have no major impact on the overall strategic balance. Barack Obama, the first American president who was too young to face the prospect of being drafted for military service during the Vietnam War, a man fully conscious of the historical parallels between his own situation and that of Lyndon B. Johnson in 1965, faces an important judgment call as to whether the military and political situation in Afghanistan is retrievable, or whether the United States should cut its losses and leave. Whether or not he reaches the best decision on that issue is likely to define how historians will in future assess his success as president of the United States.
This is the book on the Vietnam War we have been waiting for, a comprehensive and sweeping analysis that conveys the breadth, craftsmanship, and judicious insights of a skillful historian. Even those of us who think we know something about the Indochina conflict will read Prados’s account with fascination. Brimming with new and interesting detail, shrewd observations, and vibrantly-drawn portraits of major participants, the volume is a model of originality, balance, and clarity. It successfully blends the immediacy of the fighting in Vietnam, the sights and sounds of the antiwar protests at home, and the broader international context. It is the product of a painstaking researcher at the height of his intellectual powers.

Prados fully engages the existing writings on the Vietnam War. The debate over the meaning of that conflict has been raging among politicians, public intellectuals, and scholars. A new generation of revisionist historians spearheaded by Mark Moyar has contended that South Vietnam represented a vital interest of the United States, the “domino theory” was not a myth, South Vietnam President Ngo Dinh Diem was a successful leader, and President Lyndon Johnson let the victory slip through his fingers by failing to adopt several aggressive policy options that could have enabled Saigon to continue the war without a massive U.S. troop infusion.\(^1\) Prados defends the liberal orthodox view of the Vietnam War by demonstrating convincingly that the conflict in Indochina was not winnable. He clearly has Moyar in mind when he writes: “Triumph was not forsaken in Vietnam, nor victory lost; there was no day that the war was won, except for Hanoi on April 29, 1975, when its troops marched into Saigon” (p. 546).

Prados is clearly not persuaded by the recent scholarship on Vietnam that attempts to rehabilitate Ngo Dinh Diem. This rehabilitation literature tries to advance a third perspective of Diem, somewhere between Diem’s boosters who declare that Diem was a viable and successful leader and that the withdrawal of Washington’s support led to his fall, and Diem’s detractors who claim that Diem could never compete with the Communists and collapsed because of his own weaknesses and failures. The rehabilitation school endeavors to restore agency and creativity to Diem and his brother Nhu by highlighting some of their state-building projects and activities. It emphasizes the originality of their visions and ideas as embodied in the philosophy of “Personalism” and suggests that their record in the area of state building during the late 1950s was not quite one of complete failure. Their achievements, according to this view, included oversight of a period of relative economic prosperity in the South and the progress made by Diem’s security forces in rooting out the Communist Party apparatus in many parts of South Vietnam.\(^2\) Dismissing Diem’s approach

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as inept, Prados points out that "[t]he most telling commentary on Vietnamese rejection of the Diemist formula lay in the rapid rise of the southern resistance combined with the growing determination of South Vietnamese loyalists to oust him" (p. 68).

The role of President Eisenhower in the 1954 Dien Bien Phu crisis has triggered debate among historians. Unlike writers who portray Eisenhower as a passive leader who tended to be swayed by either Admiral Arthur Radford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff or Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, Prados marshals convincing evidence to demonstrate that the president was actually a firm interventionist on his own account during the Dien Bien Phu crisis, eager to avoid a negotiated settlement of the First Indochina War at the Geneva Conference. Prados is correct to highlight the long-term impact of Dien Bien Phu. The crisis, Prados writes, “had a fundamental importance, laying down a sort of genetic code. It influenced everything that followed. Dien Bien Phu not only shaped some of the intractable elements of the second war...; it led Dwight D. Eisenhower to accept an obligation to a local ally certain to renew the war.... Dien Bien Phu conditioned the thinking of key players, including three American presidents, Thieu and his commanders, many of Hanoi’s leaders, and even principals in the antiwar movement” (p. 542). I want to add that what happened at Dien Bien Phu also shaped the views of Chinese officials in their later handling of the Indochina conflict. When Beijing leaders furnished troops, weapons, and other supplies to assist the Pathet Lao offensive at Nam Tha in 1962, they had the lessons of Dien Bien Phu in mind. They wanted to help the Pathet Lao achieve a military victory at Nam Tha so that the Laotian Communists could enjoy a position of strength at the second Geneva Conference just as the Vietminh had done in their negotiations with France during the first Geneva Conference when they exploited their success at Dien Bien Phu.3

On the controversial issue of what John F. Kennedy would have done with Vietnam, Prados does not believe that JFK was committed to withdrawal at the time of his assassination. Referring to JFK’s consideration of a series of escalation proposals in Laos after war resumed there in the spring of 1963, Prados persuasively argues that “[i]t is not possible that JFK was unaware of the relationship of Laos to the war in Vietnam, and highly unlikely that Kennedy would escalate in Laos while withdrawing from Vietnam” (p. 79). Prados interprets withdrawal talk as a political weapon to leverage Saigon, “as a device to coerce Diem to dismiss the Nhus.” “Withdrawal,” Prados points out, “was a means of calling Diem’s bluff, Kennedy’s biggest stick” (p. 80).

In interpreting the role of the Joint Chiefs of Staff during the Vietnam War, Prados disagrees with the view that accuses the Chiefs of dereliction of duty. The critics of the military argue

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that during the war, particularly during Lyndon Johnson’s 1964-1965 incremental decisions on bombing and troop deployment, the Chiefs served more as tacticians rather than strategists. Prados contends that during the war the Chiefs did provide strategic advice to presidents on many occasions and that chairmen of the Joint Chiefs of Staff were often “in tune with their presidents,” especially during the Eisenhower and Nixon administrations (pp. 541-542).

Throughout his narrative, Prados offers not only numerous insightful explanations of decision-making in Washington but also many well-informed judgments on Hanoi’s policymaking. His discussion of North Vietnam’s planning for the 1968 Tet Offensive is very instructive. Drawing on recent research based on Vietnamese Communist sources, Prados shows that the Politburo in Hanoi was “largely united around seeking decisive victory—the real choice being a military versus a diplomatic track, not protracted war versus full-scale attack” (p. 193). The real debate, according to Prados, was not between Defense Minister Vo Nguyen Giap and General Nguyen Chi Thanh, top field commander of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN) but between Hanoi and its regional leaders. The regional party chiefs in Tri-Thien believed that a general uprising was premature, requiring further preparation. They suggested that if an uprising really constituted a correct option, it should be conducted in the early summer of 1968 to allow more time to make necessary groundwork. They demanded reinforcements, especially more troops and heavy equipment. In postwar reflections on the Tet Offensive, former Tri-Thien officials blamed themselves for failing to present their arguments forcefully enough.

Prados’s book touches on so many areas that I cannot comment on all of his coverage and arguments. Suffice it to say that reading his volume is a very rewarding experience. Now I would like to add a pinch or two of criticism to leaven the praise. Prados’s study suffers from a few omissions and errors. First, Prados’s treatment of the Truman administration’s handling of Indochina is relatively too brief in contrast to his detailed and extensive examination of the approaches by Truman’s successors from Eisenhower to Nixon. Left unexplored is the connection between Japan’s economic recovery and the denial of Southeast Asia to communism, the so-called “Great Crescent” theory. Truman administration officials realized that if Japan was added to the Communist bloc, the Soviet Union would acquire skilled manpower and industrial potential capable of significantly changing the balance of world power. They believed that after China’s loss to communism, Japan needed the markets and natural resources of Southeast Asia to sustain its economic growth. They wanted to establish Japan once again as the economic hub of Asia. In their calculation, accomplishment of that goal would boost the American-dominated regional and global economic systems, undermine the ideological appeal of communism, and ensure Tokyo’s loyalty to the West. They were convinced that because Japan’s economic prosperity required that peace and stability prevail in Southeast Asia, Ho Chi Minh’s insurgency, which represented a direct challenge to regional peace and stability, had to be defeated at all cost.4

Second, Prados’s analysis of the impact of the Tet Offensive on Washington’s policy-making is inadequate. He gives short shrift to the strong pressure put on the Johnson administration by the American business and financial communities to limit the U.S. commitment because of their apprehension about the budget deficits and gold and dollar crises triggered by the war. Johnson administration officials were afraid that further escalation in Vietnam would severely weaken America’s economic position at home and overseas.

Third, Prados refers to Zhou Enlai as Chinese foreign minister when he discusses U.S. relations with China during the Johnson and Nixon periods (pp. 191, 446). In fact, Zhou was replaced by Chen Yi as foreign minister in 1958.

These are minor blemishes, however, in what is a landmark study on the history of the Vietnam War by a gifted writer that should appeal to a very wide audience.

Let me begin by thanking the reviewers who have taken the time to craft these broad analyses, and our hosts at H-Diplo for devoting such space to this book. I am honored. I am also humbled by compliments the various reviewers have included in their presentations. I strive to produce work that is accessible, informative, and insightful, and I shall continue to do so. *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War, 1945-1975*, in my opinion, meets all of those criteria. Too often book reviews are hurried passes that barely scratch the surface, and seldom do readers benefit from the kind of engagement to be seen here. It has been my practice *never* to respond to a book review, and this is, in fact, the first time I have ever done so. I make an exception in this case because of the care and effort that has gone into this feature.

There were specific goals with this book. As noted in the Preface, the appearance of fresh evidence including documents, tapes, and official histories that are not reflected in the existing literature indicated the need for a new synthesis. At least two of the reviewers agree, whether or not they conclude that *Vietnam: The History of an Unwinnable War* (which hereafter will be abbreviated as “*Unwinnable War*”) accomplishes that aim. In addition, the subject exists within a contested historical terrain — Priscilla Roberts acknowledges this where she writes that “refighting the war has become [a] . . . popular pursuit” — and new readers who take up the Vietnam war will be stepping into a minefield of conflicting interpretation and even rendering of facts. It seemed important to identify key historical disputes, lay out a view of the issues based upon my research, and ground the discussion in actual source material. It is my view that many conflicting interpretations of the Vietnam war arise from the tendency to generalize from an atomized perspective which taps just part of the dinosaur, whether it be presidential decisions, battles, the antiwar movement, or international diplomacy. John T. Kuehn is positively ascerbic on my use of the term “unified field theory” to describe such a multivariate, multilevel approach, but this defect in the literature exists in reality, not theory, and needs correction in precisely the fashion adopted here. It may be worth noting that Thomas L. Hughes, in introducing *Unwinnable War* at a June 2009 session at the Wilson Center for International Scholars, specifically singled out the unified field theory approach to understanding this conflict and remarked that this was the only way to recapture the reality of Vietnam. Hughes, who headed the State Department’s Bureau of Intelligence and Research through the final months of the Kennedy administration, all of Lyndon Johnson’s, and the first half year of Richard Nixon’s, is someone who had a unique perspective on these events.

There is a symbiotic relationship between evidence and scholarship in history. Analysts tend to work to the edge of available archival material. This has been true for overview histories of the Vietnam war: right up until Robert Schulzinger’s *A Time for War: The United States and Vietnam, 1941-1975* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), that edge stood at the Johnson presidency, with some documentation on Gerald Ford’s Vietnam, but almost none on the administration of Richard Nixon (of course this is an approximation—even in 1995 many LBJ documents, for example those on the “October Surprise” of 1968, remained classified). The host of Nixon documents have only begun to open up only in the last few
years (and that record, too, remains spotty at this writing). Until now there has been no Vietnam overview that treated the Nixon period based on the archival record. That is a clear gap in our knowledge, especially pernicious since most claims to victory in Vietnam are based on events of that period. *This* is the reason, not my own experience (as asserted by Roberts) that *Unwinnable War* devotes the space it does to the 1969-1972 timeframe. The Preface to the book (p. xi) said exactly that. The Kennedy and Johnson periods have been mined extensively, the Nixon administration—critical to so many constructions of this history—remains obscure. Another important lacunae in much American writing about the Vietnam war has been our failure to devote significant attention to the Vietnamese, both South and North, and an attempt was made to rectify that. The overall result is that *Unwinnable War* is unusual for an overview, by turns narrative history, personal account, interpretive historiography, and analytical treatise.

The enduring joke among historians is that we rarely agree on anything. Priscilla Roberts criticizes a sketchy treatment of John F. Kennedy’s presidency, Robert Brigham finds the Kennedy material among the most interesting in the book. Where John Kuehn accuses me of dispensing with objectivity as my first order of business, Qiang Zhai lauds *Unwinnable War* as “a model of originality, balance, and clarity,” and David Anderson finds it “thorough and compelling.” Roberts decries the book for assuming “that the reader is already familiar with many of the leading personalities” involved, failing to describe them for the reader, while Zhai compliments the “vibrantly-drawn portraits of major personalities.” Suffice it to say that beauty lies in the eye of the beholder—or perhaps in the historical views, predispositions, or ideology of the commentator.

One of those things historians can debate is schools of thought regarding these events. Anderson highlights the question of terminology where he identifies as “orthodox” the body of historians who believe the war was not winnable, and “revisionist” those recent scholars who have asserted the war was won or could have been. Kuehn also picks up this thread in noting that *Unwinnable War* is a gambit at maintaining a “traditional” interpretation of the conflict. In my opinion this question of labels is worth confronting before it ascends to the level of conventional wisdom. At the time of the war those observers who followed the government line were “orthodox,” and those who questioned the U.S. role were the “revisionists.” Scholars today who argue for victory in Vietnam are espousing the same orthodox viewpoint that permeated the press releases and “Five O’clock Follies” of Vietnam, now represented as history. Thus *Unwinnable War* adopts the term “neo-orthodox” to describe the victory school. That has the virtue of alluding directly to the roots of this school of thought. The historical consensus they challenge now agrees the war was unwinnable but neo-orthodox attacks on it have been rising—one reason I wrote this book. The desire of a mainstream point of view to see itself as orthodox is understandable but in the context of this war seems distorting. Kuehn’s term “traditionalist” might be a good one for the rest of us. It points to the foundations of this school in the body of substantive work already done in the same way as the descriptive previously relied upon, making both labels clearly intelligible in terms of the historical debate over the Vietnam war.
On substantive matters, Robert Brigham correctly notes that the post-Geneva (1954) discussion in *Unwinnable War* is one of the key features of this analysis. Dwight D. Eisenhower’s role has long escaped adequate scrutiny and this book attempts to show how certain Eisenhower decisions paved the way into the American quagmire. Ike, in my view, rejected two opportunities to avoid war (at Dien Bien Phu/Geneva and with Diem’s machinations in 1955), he gave up U.S. leverage in Saigon by setting benchmarks for American aid which he then abandoned—and all of this before Eisenhower’s collaboration in Diem’s refusal to countenance the Geneva-mandated election in 1956, which virtually ensured that the insurgency would recur. Those threads needed to be pulled together to understand the structure of the political-military situation during the Kennedy-Johnson period of the conflict.

David Anderson, among our foremost scholars on the Eisenhower era in Vietnam policy, finds my case overdrawn, arguing that “there is considerable evidence that Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson continued to have many available options in Vietnam short of war.” This interpretive difference perhaps arises from the book’s analogy to a policy “envelope.” The rise of Vietnam to the forefront of America’s policy firmament eventually made the envelope inescapable, and at that point specific strategic decisions, war developments and political controversies progressively narrowed the range of available choices, driving the outcome. The idea was to show that presidents up through LBJ each confronted opportunities to avoid war and successively chose not to do so. In Eisenhower’s time the president had maximum flexibility and repeated occasions to make a choice of this kind. Thus greater weight is attached to Ike’s decisions. Lyndon Johnson would invoke Eisenhower’s promises as obliging America to take the course that it did. At the same time, Eisenhower’s waiver of U.S. leverage in Saigon constrained every subsequent president. I actually agree that Kennedy and Johnson still had opportunities other than war up until LBJ’s eventual decision to commit ground forces to South Vietnam.

QiangZhai extends my point about Dien Bien Phu and that is a good thing. *Unwinnable War* argues that the events of 1954 surrounding the battle of Dien Bien Phu laid a sort of genetic code for many things that happened later in the Vietnam conflict. This battle was much more than an analogy at war or the catalyst for a diplomatic conference at Geneva. Presidents, generals, and cadres invoked Dien Bien Phu regularly in support of aid programs, military plans, tactical operations, deception efforts, and other aspects of the war. I agree completely with Qiang Zhai that the Dien Bien Phu experience conditioned Chinese thinking as well. In Beijing, as well as Hanoi, Saigon, and Washington, the memory of Dien Bien Phu exercised important influence on subsequent events.

Priscilla Roberts is right that the 1950 intervention by the People’s Republic of China (PRC) in the Korean War strengthened the impression that Beijing might do the same in Vietnam. Her point about Chinese signals is well-taken. In fact the whole issue reinforces my analysis of the PRC in Vietnam: Lyndon Johnson had no alternative except to take that possibility into account, and Richard Nixon had to finesse the Chinese-Vietnamese relationship to obtain freedom of action. There should have been more discussion of the Chinese signals in this book and the fault is mine. I will correct that at the next available opportunity, but in the meantime readers may consult my earlier work *The Blood Road: The

Roberts commends Unwinnable War’s discussion of the thesis that President John F. Kennedy was set to withdraw from Vietnam. This has been an important theme in recent treatments of the war, discussion of which has been muddied by considering the issue in isolation rather than among the panoply of other factors that preoccupied Washington at that time. The book tries to put that question into its temporal context.

It is gratifying also that Roberts notes my point about the “Vietnam Data Problem,” though she mentions only the narrower aspect of “military reporting on the progress of the war.” In actuality it is a major theme of Unwinnable War that a wide array of reporting became skewed, not only from the military but from the CIA, the State Department, political operatives, and security services looking at protesters; and that this data problem conditioned the environment in which presidents made their decisions. Artificial indicators were invented based on subjective data, the information itself was often corrupted or manipulated from many sides, and then the results were deemed to be accurate appreciations upon which to base choices on strategy and force levels. The problem was much broader than “military reporting.” In fact Unwinnable War argues that a similar problem existed on Hanoi’s side of the hill. Exactly this kind of false appreciation lay behind Hanoi’s expectation that the Tet Offensive would result in a general uprising in the South.

While on the subject of North Vietnam, Kuehn objects that the book fails to provide a complete account of “the other side of the hill.” Hanoi decisions that he faults me for not covering are explicitly discussed, however (pp. 547-549). The account of North Vietnamese deliberations on the Tet offensive (pp. 191-196) is at least equal to anything available today and interpretively it is distinctive. Coverage here of the 1972 Easter offensive (pp. 449-454) is not matched anywhere in print. Other discussions of North Vietnamese thinking occur throughout, including for Hanoi’s decision for the final offensive that led to the fall of South Vietnam (p. 527-8). Kuehn’s claim that Hanoi made a strategic error in 1964-65 is his interpretation, not a consensus historical judgment by any means. And my point that U.S. aid to South Vietnam overmatched Soviet and Chinese assistance to Hanoi in the 1973-1975 period is not at all my “claim,” as Kuehn asserts it to be, but rather a direct citation of U.S. intelligence estimates. What really is a “claim” is the allegation that North Vietnam was lavishly supplied and Saigon starved of aid. The data show otherwise (p. 525-6). Saigon may have been famished but so was Hanoi. On the other hand, Kuehn is correct that Unwinnable War does not furnish a detailed account of dau tranh tactics, but as he notes, these are thoroughly discussed by Douglas Pike. Amid the array of topics to include I slighted this one. My fault again.

David Anderson mentions my references to Iraq but goes no further than that. Roberts and Kuehn both remark that in relating the Vietnam war experience to Iraq I failed to extend that analysis to Afghanistan. That is a good point and I accept the criticism. In some ways the American imbroglio in Afghanistan resembles Vietnam even more than does the Iraqi mess. In defense I will say that it was George W. Bush who made the parallel between
Vietnam and Iraq and the relevant passages in *Unwinnable War* were commentary on President Bush’s conception, or lack thereof. Also, this book was completed in September 2007, a time when Iraq was on the front burner and no one put much thought at all into Afghanistan. However, it is too soon to conclude, as Roberts does, that by the time this book reached print, “the situation in Iraq had stabilized.” Not only is the jury still out on what recent Iraqi developments actually portend, two of the most likely outcomes are a Shiite government allied with Iran—something the United States has sought to avoid—or a failed state consisting of regional and factionalized components. Neither of these eventualities resembles the vibrant Middle Eastern democracy that the Bush administration claimed to be its goal. Indeed it is not even clear at this writing that the emergent Iraqi state entity will be a democracy. Regardless of the Iraqi outcome, stabilization does not equate to victory—or even to success.

John Kuehn finds that *Unwinnable War* “seems to ignore the plethora of scholarship that most Americans had tired of the war prior to Tet.” That is not accurate. The book quotes Lyndon Johnson and his advisers, in LBJ’s own councils, making observations on the state of political support for the war (pp. 206, 211-214). The book provides an extensive treatment of a U.S. government campaign, engineered by Walt Rostow, designed to reverse that situation (pp. 216-221). Indeed *Unwinnable War* argues that the success of the Johnson-Rostow PR campaign was precisely why the 1968 Tet offensive had the major political impact in America that it did.

Kuehn also maintains that the book neglects to examine “Soviet political action inside the antiwar movement” (my italics). This red herring detracts from any effort to analyze these politics, need I say, objectively. In fact, *Unwinnable War* quotes CIA reports that were unable to find evidence of a Soviet directive role. Movement “solidarity” was not the same as foreign control. As for influence efforts, no one familiar with the upheavals of Movement politics that centered precisely upon avoiding such a taint of political manipulation—even Trotskyist, much less Soviet—could raise this as a serious objection. Apart from anything else this proposition denies agency to a multitude of individuals. That Trotsky, Mao and Lenin—by Kuehn’s lights—may have had theories of revolution that demand such interventions does nothing to establish the fact of manipulation. Incidentally the book also specifically discusses whether there was such a directive role on the part of the North Vietnamese (pp. 447-449).

Kuehn takes further exception to the observation that Vietnam, for the United States government, became two wars, one on the field of battle and another against the American public. Indeed the book also specifically discusses whether there was such a directive role on the part of the North Vietnamese (pp. 447-449).

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1 There is evidence, most recently articulated by John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev in their book *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven (CT): Yale University Press, 2009, inter alia pp. 146-152), that I. F. Stone had been recruited as a Soviet agent of influence in the 1930s. To take the extreme case, influential as he was, had Izzy Stone been working under Soviet direction, his activities were nevertheless subsumed among a wide array of those of other opinionmakers, and were in no way deterministic of the actions of the antiwar movement. Incidentally, the KGB officer who served as rezident in the United States during this period has said that he provided secret financial support to one American involved in opposition to the Vietnam war, with the implication that no directive relationship was involved (private information). Nor was any necessary.
people, and that this had never been done before. He refers to the Alien and Sedition Acts (1798-1800), “any number of actions by Abraham Lincoln,” and the internment of Japanese-Americans in World War II. This strikes me as grasping at straws. The Alien and Sedition Acts aimed at immigrants and at French-Americans (Acadians). FDR’s actions against Japanese-Americans also targeted a specific slice of the population, large as it may have been. Both episodes are rightly regarded as reprehensible—but neither zeroed in on the American people as a whole. Lincoln’s struggle with the Copperheads, more generalized, was episodic. None of these involved a systematic government effort to infiltrate and subvert citizen groups, collect massive intelligence on citizens, or counter public protest by any means necessary, each of these things on a national scale. Until Vietnam that had never occurred. My point stands.

A couple of the reviewers raise coverage of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) as inappropriate. Robert Brigham, for example, remarks that *Unwinnable War’s* account of the Nixon-era invasions of Cambodia and Laos is seen largely through the lens of VVAW. Actually neither the name Vietnam Veterans Against the War nor its acronym ever occurs in my rendering of the Cambodia operation or the antiwar protests ignited by it. As for Laos that is a different matter—by an accident of history the Laotian invasion took place at the very moment of VVAW’s “coming out” at the Winter Soldier Investigation. Because some of the charges made at Winter Soldier concerned Laos—at a time when the Nixon administration had imposed a news embargo on the invasion—this made the VVAW lens the medium through which many Americans learned that something was happening in Laos. The invasion not only had direct consequences in Vietnam, which are covered here, but fed into VVAW’s decision to carry out an action in Washington DC—the “Dewey Canyon III” described in the lead interlude of the book. In turn, that antiwar protest enflamed the White House and redoubled Nixon’s determination to break the dissenters, contributing to the action-reaction cycle that is a central element of this analysis.

In structuring this narrative it became necessary to choose some group as representative of the Vietnam war protesters if only to keep the project feasible. Many other groups, starting with Students for a Democratic Society, but on down the line to the National Mobilization to End the War in Vietnam or the Clergy and Laity Concerned about Vietnam, have been described in exhaustive detail elsewhere. Covering VVAW was logical from an analytical point of view—the vets emerged as a force at a critical moment in the Nixon administration’s quest for freedom of action. The VVAW coverage is also symbolically important because in this case American soldiers, returned from the war, became a center of dissent against it. There are several treatments of antiwar protest that note VVAW’s importance but none which cover both the administration’s special focus against it and the role of those suppressive measures in narrowing presidents’ envelope for decision. In fact Nixon’s vendetta against VVAW is a key indicator that shows the White House perceived a threat from veterans even if outside observers did not.

David Anderson, Priscilla Roberts, and John Kuehn all comment on another aspect of overall structure, my use of personal experience to illustrate how the tragedy of Vietnam
impacted the lives of individuals. As I explained in the book, a missing link in crafting an overarching explanation for why Vietnam went the way it did lies at the level of the individual: personal transformation was necessary for the public’s view of the conflict to shift from support of United States policy to the kind of opposition that actually constrained presidents. The Vietnam war, particularly government public relations and measures taken against protest, actually forced many Americans to take sides. It was a slogan of the time, popularized by the Women’s Movement, that “the personal is political.” My example is an excellent one since I moved from absolute agreement with the war to protesting it. In this age of memory versus history, including that element opens a window for readers who did not live through these events, or those too young to be aware of the larger contours surrounding pieces of this story of which they might have been aware. The student who entered college this year was born two decades after the Paris Agreement ended the major part of the American war in Vietnam. Anderson notes that “these passages have an intimacy and an ‘I was there’ authority that are unconventional for a work of scholarly analysis.” John Kuehn writes that that this material is narcissistic. Anderson would not go that far, simply observing that use of the personal might expose the work to challenge from others with different experiences. I recognized that danger but felt the risk worth taking. The more this war recedes into ancient history, the more it is necessary to evoke the smells, sense, and texture of the time.

It should be apparent from myriad works of mine that my approach is not narcissistic at all—Unwinnable War is my only one so far to include a personal element. That material serves a specific purpose, one I felt necessary for a unified approach to this history. In addition, as a result of working on this subject for more than four decades, I was present on several occasions important to the historiography of the American war. Not recording those passages would detract from what we can learn from these events—and covering them without benefit of knowledge of my background could be misleading. The reader is free to take into account my own perspective on these events. If this makes Unwinnable War narcissistic, so be it. This approach refuses to cloak ideology behind a veneer of objectivity. No reader of Unwinnable War can be in any doubt as to the position of its author. Apart from the theoretical question of whether any history can be divorced from the historian—whether true objectivity is possible—the debate over Vietnam is rooted exactly in the preconceived opinions of observers.

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2 One clarification is in order. There is a misunderstanding where Priscilla Roberts refers to my work as a designer of board games, of which I have put out or have in production about thirty. In Unwinnable War (p. 516) I refer to one such game, my first one published, which appeared in November 1972. Roberts alludes to that game, but makes it a popular one on the French war. The simulation to which I referred was actually called Year of the Rat and concerned the Easter Offensive. My game on the French war, which went through several design iterations, as well as another simulation of mine on the battle of Dien Bien Phu, remain unpublished to this day. I have published two further Vietnam games, Last Days at Saigon, in the book Pentagon Games (New York: Harper & Row, 1985); and Khe Sanh (LPS Games, 2002, 2008). But the “popular” game to which Roberts refers concerns World War II and is called Third Reich. It first appeared in 1974, exists in six editions, remains in print (currently from Avalanche Games), and has sold more than half a million copies. The confusion most likely results from the fact that I did not mention the title of the 1972 game in Unwinnable War.
Despite my political views the judgments made in *Unwinnable War* flow from straight line analysis, not ideology. Whatever my opinions at the time, the conclusions here are based on evidence—hard evidence—collected over decades. A good deal of that evidence has been opened to scholars as a result of my own efforts using declassification regulations. The more significant question from the neo-orthodox point of view is that a trained observer could collect hard evidence for decades and still determine the war was unwinnable. That says something about the contention that the war was won.

To take one example, *Unwinnable War* actually agrees with Lewis Sorley’s thesis that U.S. and South Vietnamese forces made great progress on pacification during the stewardship of field commander General Creighton V. Abrams. Exploring the data in more detail, however, this study finds, on the one hand, that the pacification statistics were exaggerated (the “Vietnam Data Problem” was everywhere), while on the other, the village war had ceased to be the center of gravity of combat in Vietnam. There are many, many other subjects of interest in the book, which the reviewers acknowledge *en bloc* simply by noting the presence of fresh material. Some of them are worth highlighting. This study shows that Lyndon Johnson considered a variant of the “Christmas Bombing” in 1965 (p. 146-147) and reframes the received history of that 1972 episode itself (504-514). *Unwinnable War* details Robert McNamara’s actual efforts to force a review of Vietnam policy late in 1967 (206-216) and provides new perspective on the “October Surprise” that blocked peace negotiations the following year (265-271). The book also relates the story behind the “Madman Theory” on Richard Nixon in depth (302-313); and that president’s effort to preempt the Easter offensive in 1972, putting the notorious “Lavelle Affair” in a new light (460-464). On the political side *Unwinnable War* uncovers White House efforts to create bogus citizens groups in support of war policy (pp. 164, 172-173, 370, 429-432), for the first time explores what Secret Service security measures can tell us about the intensity of controversy and presidents’ private attitudes (263-265, 433-434, 491-492, 495), and it shows that the Nixon White House enlisted the CIA to pay for responses to political mail on the Cambodia invasion. The book discloses that the CIA funded Nguyen Van Thieu’s mass political movement as a covert operation—and treats many Vietnam intelligence issues in some detail. In connection with the Haiphong Mining *Unwinnable War* covers the Soviet response in an unprecedented manner (480-482), showing the potential for an actual Cold War crisis. And in the final phase of the war this book zeroes in on the virtually ignored factor of the impact of the Arab oil embargo of 1973-1974 on Saigon’s war effort (524-525).

These are only a few of *Unwinnable War*’s revelations.

One analytical proposition that has gone unremarked concerns overall American strategy in pursuing the conflict. *Unwinnable War* argues that during his administration Richard Nixon appreciated the constriction of his Vietnam policy envelope and made a concerted effort to break free of it. The book uses the term “Nixon Shock” to denote the strong efforts of this president to implement military options in the face of public opposition and describes the diplomacy the administration conducted, with good success, in an effort to decouple Hanoi from its communist allies. It is a measure of the actual situation—the “winnability” of the war—that Nixon could do these things and yet fail to obtain victory.
I am glad that John Kuehn raises the subject he calls “the unitary noun ‘Vietnam,’” though distressed that he sees this as some kind of provocation on my part. Vietnam was a single nation in history, and is so today. Nothing at all was meant by that usage. In fact, writing on this subject in the 1960s and 1970s, I rendered this as “Viet-Nam.” That would still be preferable so far as I am concerned. A look at my first Vietnam book *The Sky Would Fall* (New York: The Dial Press, 1983) would show that usage. It was publishers, not I, who increasingly demanded the present form, and popular culture that seems to have accepted it. Sometime in the 1980s it became impossible to use Viet-Nam in the mass media. Alternatively, if my alleged transgression is that *Unwinnable War* was not titled to reflect Vietnams in the plural, the rejoinder is that both South and North Vietnam were artificial constructs created by an international agreement, explicitly called “regroupment zones,” and existed only between 1954 and 1975. Referring to plural Vietnams is accepting *a priori* the contention that the two Vietnams were *nation states*, and that I am not prepared to do. If Kuehn and I were discussing diacritical marks in rendering the name of the Russian general Suvorov during the Napoleonic age; or reasons why a certain Japanese aircraft of World War II was variously called a “Zero,” a “Zeke,” “Rufe,” “Hamp,” or a “Rei-sen,” I doubt there would be any insinuations of bias. This is about the beholder, not me.

I make no apology for writing what Priscilla Roberts terms “a history of American involvement in Vietnam” (notice her use of the unitary noun). In the United States a frequent refrain is that for Americans Vietnam is a war, not a country. The *Vietnamese* call this the *American War*. American troops went to Vietnam and fought long and costly battles there. An overview history of the Vietnam conflict is necessarily about Americans and Vietnamese—and *Unwinnable War* covers them both. The book also deals with a host of other international aspects of the conflict where necessary, but it does not purport to be an international history. Thus I fail, as Qiang Zhai notes, to adequately apply the Dien Bien Phu DNA to Beijing’s thinking. I did not promise otherwise. The Preface (p. xiv) noted that reasons of space precluded this being as much of an international history as I would have liked. Regardless of that affirmation the treatment of international topics in *Unwinnable War* is considerably more ample than that contained in the work Roberts extols as international history, Mark Atwood Lawrence’s *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). And if treatment of the Vietnamese side is to be regarded as “international” history—and it should be—then Roberts’s own barebones précis of *Unwinnable War’s* analysis of the Vietnamese indicates its treatment goes far beyond the English-language literature currently available.

While the Vietnamese angle is front and center let me contribute one more criticism that none of the reviewers brought up. That is the “third force” in South Vietnam, on which the treatment here is inadequate. There was a movement in South Vietnam, stymied at every turn, that favored ending the conflict through a coalition government with participation of the National Liberation Front. To some extent the treatment of Buddhists in *Unwinnable War* is a surrogate for that political tendency, but the third force movement was broader than just the Buddhists. At this writing, the sources for a detailed account of that aspect of Vietnamese history are largely unexplored, so much so that it is impossible even to say whether they are thin or ample.
Now some comments about other books mentioned by the reviewers. Arthur J. Dommen should be first, because his work is underappreciated and underutilized. I agree with Kuehn that Dommen’s *The Indochinese Experience of the French and the Americans: Nationalism and Communism in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam* (Bloomington [IN]: University of Indiana Press, 2001) takes a similarly comprehensive approach in many respects. I knew Dommen and encouraged him to write that book. He is excellent on the Southeast Asian states, but the final result was weak on the domestic political side, lacked the clarity of his earlier work, and was written without benefit of the new evidence. A. J. Langguth’s *Our Vietnam: The War, 1954-1975* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000) is quite good on South Vietnam and very well written. I have long admired Langguth’s work, starting with his journalistic reporting from Saigon during the war. He relies on that here while calling on secondary sources for a great deal of material. But where Qiang Zhai laments the few pages devoted to the Truman years in *Unwinnable War*, Langguth’s account lacks any substantial treatment at all of either the Truman or Roosevelt periods. Langguth not only did not have access to the new evidence, he made little use of existing archival evidence or of documentary material in general.

On a more theoretical plane there is mention of Jeffrey Record’s fine *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam* (Annapolis (MD): Naval Institute Press, 1998). The analysis here echoes a number of Record’s points, though he remained much more closely focused on military issues such as the lack of a clear American objective or evaluations of respective friendly or enemy capabilities. Record’s work is a good piece of policy analysis more than a history. *Unwinnable War* instead frames the conflict as a historical continuum and attempts to elicit the processes at work on the outcome. Priscilla Roberts and John Kuehn both refer to Michael Lind’s *Vietnam: The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America’s Most Disastrous Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999). Lind’s was not an overview history but rather an interpretive explication of justification and outcome. In my opinion Lind’s conclusion (p. 284) that Vietnam will be seen as a Cold War proxy battle between the United States on the one hand, and Russia and China on the other, shortchanges the Vietnamese revolution. Both parts of Vietnam are made puppets. Lind is also self-contradictory in arguing that fighting in Vietnam was necessary to maintain U.S. credibility while withdrawal was required to preserve American consensus to fight the Cold War. In the event the United States actually lost the Vietnam war without impacting credibility a whit, while the Cold War consensus was never affected by anything that happened in the Southeast Asian conflict.