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Introduction by Mark Philip Bradley

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Contents

Introduction by Mark Philip Bradley, University of Chicago.....	2
Review by Pierre Asselin, Hawaii Pacific University	7
Review by Carolyn Eisenberg, Hofstra University.....	12
Review by Jeffrey P. Kimball, Miami University, Emeritus	16
Review by Tuong Vu, University of Oregon	23
Review by Peter Zinoman, University of California, Berkeley	29
Author's Response by Lien-Hang Nguyen, University of Kentucky	34

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Introduction by Mark Philip Bradley, University of Chicago

The endgame of the American war –the eight years between the Tet Offensive of 1968 and the fall of Saigon in 1975– remain among the most controversial in the massive historiography on the Vietnam wars. What was President Richard Nixon’s ‘peace with honor’ in Vietnam all about? Were the Paris Peace Accords of 1973 intended as no more than a ‘decent interval’ for a collapsing South Vietnam? In widening the war into Cambodia, does the Nixon Administration bear culpability for the Khmer Rouge genocide? These questions and other long-simmering disputes suggest the ways in which the scholarship on this period has been almost exclusively focused on high policy-making in the Nixon Administration.¹ If considerably less attention has been paid to placing Nixon era policy in domestic American political and social history, even less has been directed at widening the interpretative frame to analyze the place of the Vietnamese in making their own history and how larger, and shifting, global forces and structures inflected both Vietnamese and American actors.

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen’s much anticipated *Hanoi’s War* is not the first book to draw upon Vietnamese-language sources in order to take up these Vietnamese and international dimensions of the war. Pierre Asselin, a contributor to this roundtable, moved in these directions in his important *A Bitter Peace* that compellingly explored North Vietnamese perspectives on the making of the Paris peace agreement.² Regrettably, few others have had the linguistic capabilities, access, and inclination to undertake sustained work in Vietnamese source materials. As all of the reviewers here point out, *Hanoi’s War* is the first major account of North Vietnamese policy during what the Vietnamese call the American War. That it appears thirty-five years after the war came to an end reflects, as Peter Zinoman rightly suggests, the “appalling America-centrism of Vietnam War Studies in the United States.”

Without question, *Hanoi’s War* is a major contribution and will serve as the starting point for writing both Vietnamese and international histories of the wars for Vietnam. Nguyen’s command of the available Vietnamese-language primary sources, both northern and southern, is impressive, as are her efforts to reconstruct North Vietnamese decision making. At its heart, *Hanoi’s War* is a study of the central wartime roles of Le Duan, the First Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party, and his right hand man Le Duc Tho, who negotiated the Paris peace accords with National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger. Nguyen also points to the marginal role played by Ho Chi Minh during the American war. Zinoman and Asselin suggest this is well known by Vietnam specialists, but in fact those scholars remain few in number and the more numerous American historians of the Vietnam war have not fully appreciated those realities. This marks the unfortunate

¹ Jeffrey Kimball nicely traces the American historiography in his recent “Vietnam War Nixonography,” *Passport* 43.3 (January 2013): 25-33.

² Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

interpretative distance between those studying the war from an American perspective and scholars in Vietnamese studies who, as Tuong Vu notes, “often ignore one another.” Nguyen’s work nicely begins to bridge that divide. In recovering the critical roles of Le Duan and Le Duc Tho, Nguyen reorients how we should approach the North Vietnamese wartime state. She helps us better appreciate the complex interplay of forces shaping North Vietnamese policy, offering astute analyses of the factionalized party politics in the north and the emergence of a highly repressive “police state” (55) in ways that reach deeper into the dense textures of the Vietnamese postcolonial past than previous scholarship. And while it is difficult to humanize Le Duan, given both available sources and the austere personality of the man himself, Nguyen’s discussion of his polygamous households begins to flesh out a more rounded portrait. Perhaps most importantly, she is able to capture the fierce single-mindedness that drove his persistent insistence on high-level military conflict in the Tet and Easter offensives, his reticence to go to the negotiating table and the critical impact of his sustained plays for international public opinion on the wider contours of the war.

The critiques offered here of *Hanoi’s War* cluster around three issues. The vexed question of ‘agency’ emerges in all of these reviews in multiple registers. Carolyn Eisenberg highlights one important dimension of the problem. She praises Nguyen’s effort “to illuminate Vietnamese agency; to bring out of the shadows the specific people who are actors and not merely victims and whose decisions changed the world in both small and profound ways.” But at the same time she questions treating American and Vietnamese policymakers as “equivalent.” Nguyen’s narrative, Eisenberg suggests, “conveys the impression that these are two rival nations ruthlessly competing for power in some hypothetical third country....*Hanoi’s War* never comes to grips with the behavior of the United States as an outside power, using its vastly superior military capability to shape the destiny of a foreign people.” For Kimball and Zinoman, the problem is the kind of agency Nguyen accords to her Vietnamese actors. Kimball argues that “Nguyen’s ascription of motive to Le Duan is problematic—namely, that he sought power in pursuit of his own ends, by which the author seems to mean power-seeking for power’s sake.” Similarly, Zinoman suggests that Nguyen’s characterization of Le Duan’s “ruthless” pursuit of total war “seems to stem from little more than a frustratingly vague reservoir of personal ambition.”

Kimball and Zinoman’s qualms relate to a second set of critiques that center on Nguyen’s Vietnamese-language sources and her use of them. Simply put, neither are convinced of their novelty, and suggest her analysis of them does not always permit a fuller understanding of what was at stake for Le Duan and the North Vietnamese leadership. By contrast, Vu and Asselin, who, it should be noted, are the reviewers who have worked most closely with these sources in the original Vietnamese, offer a considerably more sanguine view of the documents Nguyen employs and the substantial interpretative pay-offs they provide. As Zinoman himself acknowledges, working in Vietnamese archives on subjects still seen as highly sensitive by the state (and the views of the top leadership on the war are among the most sensitive) remains very difficult. No Western scholar has had better access than Nguyen to archival and printed primary sources for this period, although continuing

constraints necessarily hamper the use of documents that might have allowed her to more deeply push aspects of her analysis.

A final set of critiques involve the place of Vietnam in the wider international framework that guides Nguyen's narrative. For Zinoman, the cardinal sin for a historian of the Vietnamese war appears to be "orthodoxy," an interpretative posture on the war he never explicitly defines here but which seems to mean an uncritical celebration of the North and the National Liberation Front. He scores Nguyen for the ways in which she "repackages, and reinvigorates, an overly benign view of Ho Chi Minh" and suggests her discussion of the southern revolutionary leadership "suffers from the same weaknesses that plague treatment of this nebulous group in most orthodox accounts." Vu, while never employing the notion of orthodoxy explicitly, calls out Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap for their "cowardice" and lavishes praise on Nguyen for her hard-headed approach to Le Duan's "fanaticism" and her concern with "the terror unleashed by the police state in North Vietnam," a dimension of her argument that Vu argues has contemporary resonance for Vietnamese society, in which the "repression continues today."

Neither concern with "orthodoxy" nor offering cautionary historical parables for present-day Vietnam are central to Nguyen's project. Instead of refighting the Cold-war battles of yesteryear, *Hanoi's War* begins to point us toward fundamentally new interpretative vistas. A case in point is Nguyen's argument about the success of the North Vietnamese in garnering international public opinion for the endgame of the war. It is a claim either ignored in these reviews or treated skeptically in passing, though more robustly in a recent *London Review of Books'* review of *Hanoi's War* by Andrew Bacevich who called it "hogwash."³ I am less sure. Indeed Bacevich and others have missed the point. If one begins to lift the Cold War frame, as Nguyen does so ably in her book, the shifts in the structures of power in the international system in the 1960s and 1970s become palpable. Matthew Connelly has captured some of them, including demographic growth and population movement, environmental changes, new media, and the conscious agency of decolonizing people to promote radical systemic change that together were severely weakening the bi-polar world order at the height of what Cold-War scholarship called American "hegemony."⁴ Moreover, as Daniel Sargent has argued, American policymakers like Nixon and Kissinger were often oblivious to transformative shifts in the transnational flow of information and an international political-economic-cultural multipolar order increasingly shaped by complex interdependence rather than classic *realpolitik*.⁵ Nguyen's sustained and original discussion of Vietnamese public diplomacy suggests that the North

³ Andrew Bacevich, "Small Nations, Take Heed," *London Review of Books* 35.3 (7 February 2013): 21.

⁴ See Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria's Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁵ Daniel Sargent, *From Internationalism to Globalism: The United States and the Transformation of International Politics in the 1970s* (Ph.D. Thesis, Harvard University, 2008). See also Paul Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

Vietnamese were far more attuned to these novel developments. It also deepens and thickens a broader emergent interpretative approach to the international history of the 1960s and 1970s that moves far beyond Cold-war historiographical verities.

The kinds of narratives we tell about the wars for Vietnam are likely to look very different in ten years' time. In presenting a globally situated account of the perceptions and policy in the North Vietnamese state, Nguyen points us toward that future. As Eisenberg writes, and many of the other reviews here concur, *Hanoi's War* is a "remarkable achievement."

Participants:

Lien-Hang T. Nguyen is Associate Professor of History at the University of Kentucky. She earned her B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania and her Ph.D. from Yale University. She is the author of *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012) and is currently working on a comprehensive history of the Vietnam War and a study on gender and people's diplomacy in the Cold War.

Mark Philip Bradley is Bernadotte E. Schmitt Professor of International History at the University of Chicago. He is the author of *Imagining Vietnam and America* (2000) and *Vietnam at War* (2009); the co-editor of *Making Sense of the Vietnam Wars* (2008); and is completing a book manuscript on the place of the United States in the twentieth century global human rights imagination.

Pierre Asselin is associate professor of history at Hawaii Pacific University in Honolulu. He is the author of *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (North Carolina, 2002). Recent publications include "The Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the 1954 Geneva Conference: A Revisionist Critique" in *Cold War History* (2011); "Revisionism Triumphant: Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy in the Nixon Era" in *Journal of Cold War Studies* (2011); and "'We Don't Want a Munich': Hanoi's Diplomatic Strategy, 1965-1968" in *Diplomatic History* (2012). His second book entitled *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* is forthcoming from the University of California Press.

Carolyn Eisenberg is a professor of U.S. foreign policy at Hofstra University. She is the author of a prize-winning book, *Drawing the Line: the American Decision to Divide Germany, 1944-49*. (Cambridge University Press) and is presently completing book on the national security policy of Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger to be published by WW Norton Press.

Jeffrey P. Kimball is Professor Emeritus of History at Miami University (Ohio, USA) and the author of articles, reviews, book chapters, and books on diplomacy, war, peace, politics, popular culture, and historiography from the War of 1812 to the Vietnam and Afghanistan wars. He is currently completing a co-authored book on the history and legacy of nuclear threat-making.

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His book, *Paths to Development in Asia: South Korea, Vietnam, China, and Indonesia* (2010), received a Bernard Schwartz Award Honorable Mention for the best book on Asia in 2011. He is co-editor of *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity, and Culture* (2009) and *Southeast Asia in Political Science: Theory, Region and Qualitative Analysis* (2008). His articles have appeared in *World Politics*, *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, *Studies in Comparative International Development*, *Theory and Society*, *South East Asia Research*, and *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*.

Peter Zinoman is Professor of History and Southeast Asian Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. He is the author of the *Colonial Bastille: A History of Imprisonment in Vietnam, 1862-1940* and the editor and co-translator of *Dumb Luck: A Novel by Vu Trong Phung*. He is also the editor-in-chief of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. He is currently completing a study of Vu Trong Phung and colonial modernity in interwar Hanoi. His most recent essay "Nhan Van Giai Pham and Vietnamese 'Reform Communism' during the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation" will appear in the *Journal of Cold War Studies* in the Winter 2011 issue.

Hanoi's War introduces new evidence on, and fresh interpretations of, key political, diplomatic, and military aspects of the Vietnam War that are sure to stimulate debate among specialists in relevant fields. Based on an extensive array of Vietnamese language materials, including primary sources collected from Vietnam, the book spotlights the strategic thinking of the leaders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRVN, i.e., North Vietnam) in the decade before and after the onset of US military intervention in 1965. Considering the political system in Vietnam, the secretive nature of its decision-making, and the fact that the archives of the Vietnamese communist party and of the Foreign and Defense ministries are largely inaccessible to both local and foreign scholars (although Nguyen did get into the Foreign Ministry's archive), the quantity and quality of pertinent documents obtained by the author is impressive. The North Vietnamese diplomatic cables upon which a portion of the book rests represent some of the best evidence to date shedding light on the evolution of Hanoi's strategic thinking during the latter stages of the war (1969-72). The book also relies on original documents to present the perspective on some core issues of the former South Vietnamese regime, a major actor in the conflict that has been neglected by scholars, as well as the Nixon administration. On balance, however, this is really an assessment of Hanoi's domestic and foreign policymaking.

One of the most remarkable aspects of the book is the amount of details it provides about the Vietnamese Workers' Party (VWP), the communist organ controlling the North, and the DRVN government. Nguyen states at the outset that one of her goals is to expose "the internal workings of America's most elusive enemy during the Cold War" (3). In that, she absolutely succeeds. I know of no English-language source that does a better job of explaining the inner workings of the DRVN and of its decision-making than *Hanoi's War*. The book offers unique insights into the bodies that shaped policymaking and otherwise conditioned the lives of people in the North. Especially illuminating are Nguyen's descriptions of the functions assumed by various sub-committees advising Party leaders and by the North's internal security apparatus. Given the constraints facing Vietnam scholars noted above, that is no small feat. Nguyen's ability to shed light on such facets attests to the quality of the confidential Vietnamese materials she collected, for only such materials could provide the kind of information she shares in her book.

The book also addresses intra-VWP contentions and rivalries, which have been for the most part poorly documented. It adroitly presents the cleavage that emerged within the Party after the signing of the 1954 Geneva accords ending the Franco-Vietnamese War (1946-54). A number of ranking communists, including many who were operating in southern Vietnam, quietly condemned the top leadership's decision to acquiesce in accords calling for suspension of combat operations and partition of the country. Ending hostilities prematurely was cowardly, they thought, while assuming that reunification under communist aegis would come peacefully within two years, following nation-wide elections which were mandated by the accords, was naïve at best. Once it became clear the elections would never materialize, the Party leadership had to decide whether to (1) wait on events

in the South and continue the socialist transformation of the North it had undertaken right after signing the Geneva accords or (2) pursue southern 'liberation' by force at the risk of provoking war with the United States and compromising the socialist project in the DRVN. That dilemma polarized Party leaders and rank-and-file members into two rival camps, "North-firsters" who favored the former option and "South-firsters" who supported the latter (42). *Hanoi's War* relates not only the polarization, but the struggles for power it generated in the DRVN capital as well. It also introduces readers to the cast of characters that formed the core of each of the two competing factions.

While some scholars have long been aware of this and in fact previously addressed the issue in their own writings, many readers will be surprised to find out that DRVN president Ho Chi Minh was no longer a central figure in Hanoi by the time war with the United States broke out, and that he was in fact marginal.¹ Ho was always the face of the Vietnamese revolution, to be sure, but other, lesser-known individuals actually held sway over DRVN decision-making by 1965. Most notable among them, Nguyen aptly demonstrates, were Le Duan, the VWP's First Secretary, and his loyal deputy, Le Duc Tho, head of the powerful Party Organization Committee that was charged with keeping tabs on members and recommending individuals for appointment to key positions within the VWP. With assistance from Tho, using manipulation, deception, and other such tactics, the First Secretary, a staunch South-firster, succeeded in sidelining ideological rivals within the Party, including Ho, the leading North-firster, and creating an executive structure that allowed him to monopolize political power, to become a virtual dictator, and to set the DRVN on a collision course with the United States. To help readers get a clearer sense of the roles assumed by Le Duan and Le Duc Tho in Hanoi and of their relationship during the Vietnam War, Nguyen draws an interesting – and valid – parallel to a pair of Americans. Just as President Richard Nixon and his national security advisor, Henry Kissinger, notoriously formulated key foreign policies under a veil of secrecy with minimal input from others in the United States, Le Duan and Tho did the same in the DRVN. And just as Kissinger dutifully served Nixon and facilitated implementation of his vision, Tho acted as Le Duan's devoted enabler.

According to Nguyen, the course of Hanoi's "war for peace" was for all intents and purposes charted by Le Duan. His lack of faith in diplomacy, his commitment to violent 'liberation' of the South, and his belief in the inevitable triumph of a revolutionary strategy predicated on the concept of "general offensive and general uprising" (65) – essentially, major combat operations carried out concurrently with propaganda and agitation ('agitprop') work among the South Vietnamese masses – account for Hanoi's obdurate refusal for so long to negotiate seriously with Washington and to pursue victory by military means instead. Le Duan's misguided convictions, Nguyen contends, were at least partly responsible for the

¹ See for instance Ang Cheng Guan, *The Vietnam War from the Other Side: The Vietnamese Communists' Perspective* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2002); Pierre Asselin, "Le Duan, the American War, and the Creation of an Independent Vietnamese State" in *Journal of American East-Asian Relations*, Vol. 10, no. 1-2 (2001; published 2006), 1-27; and Sophie Quinn-Judge, "The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-68" in *Cold War History*, Vol. 5, No. 4. (November 2005), 479-500.

“enormous casualties” (311) suffered by Vietnamese on both sides of the seventeenth parallel during the war. This is a very important point. For far too long Americans and the academics among them in particular have looked at the Vietnam War with an eye highly critical of U.S. decision-making that exonerates Hanoi for the tragedies produced by the conflict. The war has been described variously as ‘Lyndon Johnson’s war’ and ‘Nixon’s Vietnam War,’ suggesting that the Vietnamese themselves were far less active agents in it than the Americans.² *Hanoi’s War* remedies the imbalance, to a degree at least, by showing that Hanoi, not Washington, orchestrated the war’s bloodiest battles, including the 1968 Tet Offensive and the 1972 Spring Offensive, with a view to achieving unmitigated victory on the battlefields of the South. The United States was never “in a position to unilaterally dictate the course of the war” (299), Nguyen justly observes. Similarly, it “was not alone in prolonging the war”; American decision-makers were in fact often “at the mercy of actors in Hanoi” who possessed “their own geostrategic reasons to extend the fighting and to frustrate the peace negotiations” (9).

Intractably set on unequivocal victory – that is, unilateral and unconditional withdrawal of U.S. forces, the abdication of the presiding government in Saigon, and national reunification under VWP governance – Le Duan’s regime did not take seriously the peace talks with American officials that opened in Paris in 1968. Even after agreeing to secret talks with the Nixon administration, the regime refused to negotiate in good faith, confident that total victory remained achievable. Nguyen’s account of the secret and, after January 1972, private talks between Hanoi and Washington is largely consistent with my own in *A Bitter Peace*.³ Nguyen did, however, benefit from the information contained in a highly revealing, still classified collection from the Vietnamese foreign ministry entitled *Dai su ky chuyen de: Dau tranh ngoai giao va van dong quoc te trong nhung chien chong My cuu nuoc (Special Chronology: The Diplomatic Struggle and International Activities of the Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation)*. This collection partly consists of excerpts from the correspondence between Hanoi and its negotiators in the secret/private Paris talks covering everything from the substance of the discussions with Americans negotiators to the state of relations with socialist allies. While some of those excerpts have been reproduced in Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu’s work on the Paris talks, others are quoted for the first time in Nguyen’s book.⁴ Most noteworthy and heretofore untapped are reports on the state of Sino-Vietnamese relations in 1972, as Beijing pursued rapprochement with Washington. On the basis of those reports Nguyen provides captivating details about the substance of exchanges that year between North Vietnamese and Chinese leaders, exchanges that underscored Hanoi’s vexation at seeing Beijing cozy up to Washington as

² Michael H. Hunt, *Lyndon Johnson’s War: America’s Cold War Crusade in Vietnam, 1945-1968* (Chicago: Hill and Wang, 1997); Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon’s Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

³ Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

⁴ Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Cac cuoc thuong luong Le Duc Tho-Kissinger tai Paris* [The Le Duc Tho-Kissinger Negotiations in Paris], 2nd ed. (Hanoi: Nha xuất bản Chính trị Quốc gia, 2002).

the war in Vietnam entered its most decisive phase. Notwithstanding this evidence, Nguyen's conclusion on the prospects for a long-term, viable diplomatic solution to the Vietnam War is the same as the one I presented in my book, articulated in the same words: under circumstances then, "peace never had a chance in Vietnam" (Nguyen, jacket cover; Asselin, 190).

Like all ambitious monographs, Nguyen's suffers from certain faults and omissions. The subtitle is misleading. The work is only partly international history; the bulk of the narrative addresses Hanoi's wartime experiences from the perspective of key leaders there. And what is a "war for peace"? Can it not be said that all wars are waged for peace in the eyes of those who prosecute them? What did peace mean to Hanoi leaders? Was it simply the absence of war? Or was it something else? In the book's first part, the author writes that Hanoi's "war machinery" was "set into motion" in late 1961, that it was then that its armed struggle in the South "moved on the offensive with the expressed goal of attacking and annihilating the enemy's forces" (59). That statement is questionable. Existing evidence indicates that the annihilation of Saigon's armed forces did not become a strategic priority for Hanoi until the VWP Central Committee's Ninth Plenum of late 1963. In fact, in her conclusion the author herself iterates that it was not until after the plenum that Hanoi advanced toward "full-scale war" (308) in the South. She adds that shifting to "revolutionary war" at that juncture provided Hanoi with an "effective means to deflect attention from domestic problems" (308). Unfortunately, her narrative provides no evidence validating that bold claim.

Nguyen's assessment of the final stages of the war is problematic at times. The "decent interval" thesis (192) has been invalidated by a recent *Foreign Relations of the United States* volume.⁵ The same volume indicates that in launching Linebacker II, the so-called 'Christmas bombing' of Hanoi and Haiphong, in December 1972, Nixon sought to communicate his resolve to achieve "peace with honor" with Hanoi, without concern for Saigon's reaction. That is, the December bombing aimed exclusively at persuading Hanoi to resume the suspended peace talks and concede on two remaining issues so that an agreement could be completed; it did not aspire to make Thieu more amenable to a negotiated settlement. In light of what subsequently transpired in Paris during the final round of negotiations, when DRVN negotiators conceded on the two issues in question, affirming as Nguyen does that Linebacker II failed to "break the will of Hanoi" (297) seems questionable. Last, the author could have done more to address the role that ideology played in informing the strategies and tactics devised by Le Duan and employed by Hanoi during the war.

Despite these minor shortcomings, *Hanoi's War* is an outstanding piece of scholarship. It constitutes the best assessment to date of communist decision-making and of the

⁵ John M. Carland, ed. *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976: Volume IX: Vietnam, October 1972-January 1973*. Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 2010. For more on the invalidation of the "decent interval" thesis see my review of the aforementioned volume forthcoming on *H-Diplo*.

functioning of the DRVN during the Vietnam War. The quality of the source material is unparalleled, and the insights provided by the author invaluable. Make no mistake about it: this is a seminal contribution to our understanding of the other side's experience in one of America's lengthiest and most controversial Cold War interventions. Serious students of the Vietnam War must read *Hanoi's War*.

Review by Carolyn Eisenberg, Hofstra University

During the past six years, Lien-Hang Nguyen has been presenting papers and publishing articles about the war in Vietnam which draw heavily upon Vietnamese sources. Although a growing, albeit small group of historians have used the Vietnamese materials, Nguyen's research has elicited particular interest because of her wide-ranging approach to the war, as well as the depth of her scholarship.

Born in Saigon in 1974, she was brought to the United States as a five-month old baby and raised in a family which included relatives who had fought on both sides of the war. As an adult, Nguyen returned to Vietnam several times and over the course of a decade conducted extensive interviews and poured over previously unavailable archival collections, including the Archives of the Vietnam Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Her book, *Hanoi's War* has been much awaited. And indeed, it more than fulfills these high expectations.

In the future, scholars writing about this period will need to consult Nguyen's book. It is rich in insight and filled with challenging interpretations on many questions large and small. While it is certain to generate controversy, the author is without peer in helping us to understand Hanoi's role in what is too frequently seen exclusively as America's war. This is perhaps the unifying theme of the book –that the Vietnamese themselves were major actors in this story and that among them, two North Vietnamese leaders, Le Duan, Secretary-general of Vietnam's Communist Party (Lao Dong) and his 'right-hand man' Le Duc Tho, a member of the North Vietnamese Politburo and chief peace negotiator, had a profound influence on events. The latter conclusion may come as a surprise to readers, who have assumed that Ho Chi Minh was the dominant political figure in the North and General Giap its foremost military strategist.

The author is so clear and direct in her writing that it is easy to overlook some of the analytical strengths of her work. For one thing, she has mastered the scholarly literature on the American side and is able to give a lucid exposition of official U.S. policy. She has also assimilated the growing literature on the USSR and China and is able to clarify the complexities of their involvement in the conflict. Her unique contribution is her examination of the North Vietnamese role, but it is her ability to integrate that discussion with a sophisticated understanding of American, Soviet and Chinese policy that makes her book so formidable.

The complexity of this task—weaving together these policy stories based on a pioneering examination of thousands of primary documents, from several nations-- requires some methodological shortcuts. As Nguyen explains, "Rather than focus on the everyday lives of people, who lived through the war...I have sought answers at the loci of power. This is not because I believe that leaders matter more than the people they ostensibly led or that the decisions they made behind closed doors are necessarily more important or definitive than the individual choices and actions of those on the ground. But to understand who is

responsible for how and why whole nations go to war, a ‘top down approach’ is necessary” (14).

When stated abstractly, this methodological approach seems both familiar and sensible. Authors can’t do everything, and in this book, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen takes on a host of ambitious tasks. However, what this means in practice is that she provides a minimum of information about what is happening on the ground throughout the war or how the words of various leaders and diplomats translated into actions.

In a number of ways the relative neglect of actual behavior undermines the description of policy-making. One overarching problem is the equivalent treatment of policymakers in the United States and North Vietnam. The narrative conveys the impression that these were two rival nations ruthlessly competing for power in some hypothetical third country. The foreignness of the United States, not to mention its critical role in creating an artificial nation of South Vietnam and perpetuating it through violence is barely acknowledged.

One could reasonably assert that this is old news and needs no special mention. But the story being told here, as exemplified by the book’s title, *Hanoi’s War*, never comes to grips with the behavior of the United States as an outside power, using its vastly superior military capability to shape the destiny of a foreign people. That circumstance cannot be dis severed from policy-making itself---the knowledge in Washington that sooner or later U.S. troops had to come home, or the conviction in Hanoi that they were fighting off an invader who did not belong in their country.

A particular strength of this book is Nguyen’s extended discussion of the arc of conflict during the first Nixon Administration. The author is especially persuasive in developing key themes: the determination of President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger to find Hanoi’s ‘breaking point’ despite intense opposition at home, the willingness of leaders in Hanoi to subject their own people to unremitting suffering and sacrifice, the increasing reliance by the Americans on the good offices of the Soviets and Chinese to obtain a favorable peace agreement in Paris, and the mounting apprehension in Hanoi of their patrons’ betrayal.

Yet here as well, the emphasis on policymakers’ words and the abbreviated treatment of actual events skews the analysis. A defining moment for the Nixon Administration and for the North Vietnamese was Lam Son 719, an advance by thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers into Laos in early 1971. The special project of Henry Kissinger and Military Assistant Alexander Haig, the aim was to attack North Vietnamese troops in southern Laos, destroy their bases and supplies, disrupt the Ho Chi Minh trail and avert an enemy offensive during the dry season. This plan was risky because unlike the Cambodian invasion, the South Vietnamese army would be entering Laos on their own, although they were promised support from American air power and artillery just across the border.

Nguyen acknowledges that Lam Son 719 was “a failure” or at least “a public relations defeat” (203). But in the absence of any details about the campaign, a reader cannot so readily discern how this experience affected policy decisions in both Washington and

Hanoi. For Nixon and Kissinger, it was a devastating sign that their program of Vietnamization was not working and that without the U.S. military presence, Saigon would be unable to fight on alone. It was against this backdrop that the two became desperately eager for help from Moscow and Beijing to help them gain in negotiations what could not be achieved on the battlefield.

As for Hanoi, the collapse of Lam Son 719 emboldened its leadership to break free of their “economy of force” (234) strategy and to revive plans for a full-scale offensive, to be accompanied by an urban uprising. While Nguyen recognizes that the ill-starred movement of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) into Laos gave new confidence to their communist opponents, she seems to assign greater explanatory weight to the impact of Nixon and Kissinger’s ‘triangular diplomacy’ on their decision. She contends that these breakthroughs with the Soviets and Chinese “compounded Hanoi’s sense of urgency to change the balance of power on the ground militarily, before events at the international level could fatally weaken the VWP [Vietnam Worker’s Party]war effort” (223). This is an arresting thesis. But given the unwavering North Vietnamese determination to win the war and the demonstrated weakness of the South Vietnamese army in Laos, it is difficult to imagine that the leaders in Hanoi would have chosen differently regardless of the diplomatic context.

A similar question arises when it comes to the Easter Offensive of 1972. Here the emphasis is on the utter failure of North Vietnamese strategy. In a highly compressed account, the author describes the three-pronged Popular Army of Vietnam (PAVN) (Popular Army of Vietnam) attack into South Vietnam, its “stunning victories” (245) during the first six weeks and the reversal of fortune as U.S. planes slowed their advance, and South Vietnamese troops drove them back to the borders. The reader is left with the clear impression that ARVN had triumphed after all and that Hanoi was forced back to diplomacy and an ignominious capitulation.

In her account, some combination of Nixon’s firmness, plus Soviet and Chinese treachery lead to a peace agreement that the North Vietnamese had hoped to avoid. “Nixon’s gamble had paid off,” she argues. “Neither Beijing nor Moscow was willing to risk its relations with the United States for the Vietnamese cause”(256). And so after years of resistance, Hanoi agreed to a cease-fire, without requiring that Saigon’s leaders Generals Nguyen Van Thieu, Nguyen Cao Ky, Tran Thein Khiem be removed from office.

Nguyen’s mastery of the evidence on these matters is formidable. Yet there is reason to think that a more detailed discussion of the 1972 Spring Offensive and *Linebacker I* would reveal the continued incompetence of ARVN, as well as the battlefield achievements of the North Vietnamese. Despite many setbacks, when the dust had cleared, there were 150,000 North Vietnamese troops now entrenched inside South Vietnam, many of which had not been there previously.¹ There is good reason to suppose that a major factor in Le Duc Tho’s reversal in Paris was the presence of these soldiers. Perhaps this consideration, more than

¹ Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor*, (New York: The Free Press) 174.

any pressure from Moscow or Beijing made the new agreement palatable? Once the Americans left, it seemed more likely than ever that the Saigon government could not hold out. This was certainly the perception of General Thieu, who recognized immediately that the retention of these troops portended disaster for his regime.

There is some discernible ambivalence in Nguyen's presentation of the 'endgame.' As she takes the reader through the final peace negotiations, she conveys the sense that the brilliant diplomacy of Nixon and Kissinger enabled them to snatch victory from the jaws of impending defeat. Yet this does not appear to be her final conclusion, as she clearly recognizes that the eventual fall of Saigon was directly related to the flawed peace agreement.

It is not Nguyen's purpose to ascribe final responsibility for defeat or victory. Her primary aim, as she makes clear throughout, is to illuminate Vietnamese agency; to bring out of the shadows the specific people who are actors and not merely victims and whose decisions changed the world in both small and profound ways. The previous reservations notwithstanding, *Hanoi's War* is a remarkable achievement. It is sure to become a classic in the field, a book which all scholars will peruse with great profit and which general readers will find wonderfully illuminating.

In her much-anticipated book about the “other” side¹ in the U.S.-Vietnam War, Lien-Hang Nguyen takes the story of “Hanoi’s War” from the late 1950s to January 1973, with an emphasis on the years after 1967. In the first half of the book, the author traces General Secretary Le Duan’s rise to power, his relationship with his second wife, the stories of two Communist Party dissenters, and Le Duan’s direction of the war from the 1968 Tet Offensive and the start of the negotiating process in Paris. In second half, Nguyen surveys Le Duan’s military and diplomatic strategy leading up to the 27 January 1973 Agreement on Ending the War and Restoring Peace in Vietnam.

Interspersed through her narrative is an account of the policies of the U.S. administration of President Richard M. Nixon and the part played by Beijing and Moscow as suppliers of aid to Hanoi and participants in Hanoi’s and Washington’s game of triangular diplomacy. The role of Western and Eastern European governments is largely absent. Nguyen includes brief discussions of developments in Laos and Cambodia, and she gives passing mention to Australian, Filipino, New Zealand, South Korean, and Taiwanese participation in the U.S. war effort as well as to the intermediation of nonaligned nations. The author provides what may be new information on Saigon’s and Hanoi’s attempts to win support from international opponents of the war, be they governments or groups, although the activities and impact of U.S., European, and Australian antiwar movements and antiwar activities in other places are not part of Nguyen’s narrative or analysis.

She properly rejects the charge that President Nguyen van Thieu was a puppet of the United States and instead claims “agency” (137) for him and his government in influencing the trajectory of the war. But her narration of events—in contrast to her chapter introductions and conclusions²—confirms the widely-held view that Saigon’s agency

¹ Nguyen remarks that “much is known about America’s war in Vietnam” but that the “‘other’ side’s conflict remains a mystery” (2). This seems to imply that many or most historians have regarded or treated the Vietnamese as the alien Other in their writing. Actually, much had been written and known about the role of the South Vietnamese, the North Vietnamese, and the National Liberation Front before her book, and though much more needs to be discovered about the roles and cultures of the Vietnamese *and* the Americans, it is an exaggeration to say that the Vietnamese side of the conflict was previously a mystery. Moreover, the professional historians, serious journalists, veterans, and former diplomats from many countries who have written about the war have normally treated the Vietnamese not as the ‘Other’ but as the ‘other side’ in the war, since by definition there are always two or more sides in any war. ‘Other side’ is sometimes a convenient substitution for having to repeatedly name the Hanoi Politburo and the Provisional Revolutionary Government and National Liberation Front or the People’s Army of Vietnam and the People’s Liberation Army in every reference. It is also worth noting in this regard that while Americans refer to the war as the Vietnam War, the Vietnamese call it the American War. On the other hand, there is little doubt that many individuals on both sides who were being shot at, bombed, or tortured came to regard the shooters, bombers, and torturers as the Other.

² This disconnect between the author’s interpretative generalizations or conclusions and her narrative of events also applies to big issues such as her claims that Nixon’s triangular diplomacy was spectacularly successful or that the Nixinger policy of the decent-interval is to be questioned. But her

mostly consisted of Thieu having caused Nixon and Kissinger to worry about whether he would cooperate with their policies. On the other hand, she mentions the important part South Vietnamese ground forces played in pacification and in halting the Easter Offensive (although she barely mentions what many consider to be the decisive role of U.S. air power and U.S. advisors). Lien-Hang Nguyen provides brief coverage of Madame Nguyen Thi Binh's diplomatic activities but writes relatively little about the southern revolutionary movement as a whole, its policy positions, and its influence on the course of the war and the negotiations. Her focus instead is on describing how Le Duan and his "right-hand man," Le Duc Tho, "hijacked" the southern revolutionary movement's "policy . . . for their own ends" (3).

Nonetheless, her book remains an "international history" in the way that many other diplomatic and military histories of wars are international in scope. Whether their authors have used the label or not, they have included significant international and transnational elements, but by necessity or choice, and rightly or wrongly, they have focused their research and analysis on particular nations, institutions, groups, individuals, factors, and forces more than upon others. Different authors ask different but still legitimate questions about international phenomena, as Nguyen has. Her big questions are: Who made policy and strategy in Hanoi, and why? What were the policies and strategies of the warring parties? Which side won and which side lost the war?

Regarding the first question, she argues that Le Duan was the "iron-willed," "iron-fisted," "architect, main strategist, and commander-in-chief of Communist Vietnam's war effort" (2), who exercised dominant control over Hanoi's Politburo, internal security, foreign policy, and military strategy-making, and who, in the process, created a "garrison state," "police state," and "militaristic empire."³ This thesis runs through the book, whose title could more fittingly have been *Le Duan's War* rather than *Hanoi's War*.

Because the internal documents of the "troika" (the Communist Party, the Ministry of Defense, and the Foreign Ministry) remain "off limits" to researchers (11), the author bases her thesis about Le Duan's power-seeking, power-wielding, policy-making, and war-making primarily upon her examination of documentary "collections of state bureaucracies" and "published, semi-circulated, and closed texts" of the troika (11-12). Even though these have been "heavily sanitized and edited," she maintains that an able and well-grounded historian with "an ability to read the current political tea leaves" can gain "glimpses" into high-level thinking by reading "between the lines" (11-12). She has supplemented her research materials with interviews and interpretations of official Vietnamese histories, public speeches, memoirs, reminiscences, biographies, and autobiographies.

narrative of events indicates that Nixon's triangular diplomacy produced mixed results and that Nixon and Kissinger did in fact follow a decent-interval policy (cf, e.g., 195 and 227, and 6 and 192).

³ Also see similar but more strongly worded remarks in the author's op-ed, "Exploding the Myths about Vietnam," *New York Times/International Herald Tribune Sunday Review*, 11 August 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/12/opinion/sunday/what-we-dont-know-about-vietnam-can-still-hurt-us.html?pagewanted=1&r=2&adxnnl=1&adxnnlx=1349791333-K52pKDOq%20dMs9TLH2VHr%20Q>

Nguyen notes that her most valuable source for the negotiations in Paris was two volumes of the still-classified five-volume *Special Chronology: The Diplomatic Struggle and International Activities of the Anti-American Resistance and National Salvation (Dai su ky chuyen de: Dau Tranh Ngoai Giao va van dong quoc te trong nhung chien chong My cuu nuoc, or DTNG)*. I can well appreciate its value. In the mid-1990s, I was the fortunate recipient of a translated portion of the *DTNG* and drew upon it in writing *Nixon's Vietnam War*.⁴ The document's entries, along with my interviews of former policymakers in Hanoi, were instrumental in helping me identify the issues of most importance to the Politburo at a time when existing published accounts, including Henry Kissinger's *White House Years* (1979), offered muddled accounts of the Paris talks.⁵ It is my understanding that at one point before 2010 the five-volume *DTNG* had come into the possession of a Washington, D.C. research organization, which then made it available to Nguyen. It not only contains chronological entries but also includes quotations from telegrams between Paris and Hanoi, assessments of the Tho-Kissinger meetings, Hanoi's conjectures about U.S. strategy, and other internal reports.

Based on what I can determine from a careful reading of Nguyen's exegesis of the complete version of the *DTNG*, it does not yield significantly different understandings than those previously gleaned about Hanoi's goals, positions, policies, and strategies from sources like Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu's *Le Duc Tho-Kissinger Negotiations in Paris*⁶; captured documents of the Central Office for South Vietnam (COSVN)⁷; memoirs, reminiscences, and official histories published in Vietnam; interviews of Vietnamese participants; materials from China, Russia, and Eastern Europe; and the large body of records and tapes declassified in the United States, especially the transcripts of the private meetings in Paris. Nonetheless, the *DTNG* is a unique and significant source—although perhaps not the “*Pentagon Papers*” or the “Holy Grail” of Vietnamese diplomacy, as Nguyen describes it (12 & 13). In any case, we can only hope that the *DTNG* will eventually be made available to other researchers.

Lacking access to many of Lien-Hang Nguyen's Vietnamese sources on internal politics, and beyond what information and analysis other Southeast Asian scholars have previously supplied, I have little basis upon which to assess the issue of whether Le Duan did or did

⁴ Jeffrey P. Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

⁵ In 2000 I had reproduced my portion of the *DTNG* in a conference paper I presented in Hong Kong, in which I compared the document's entries to information in U.S. and Vietnamese sources; I also cited it in Jeffrey P. Kimball, *The Vietnam War Files: Uncovering the Secret History of Nixon-Era Strategy* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004).

⁶ Luu Van Loi and Nguyen Anh Vu, *Le Duc Tho-Kissinger Negotiations in Paris*, Hanoi: Thê'Giô Publishers, 1996.

⁷ Central Office for South Vietnam was an American transliteration of the Vietnamese Central Committee Directorate for the South.

not wield more or less power in Hanoi. I do think, however, that Nguyen's ascription of *motive* to Le Duan's actions and policies is problematic—namely, that he sought power in pursuit of his own ends, by which the author seems to mean power-seeking for power's sake.⁸ My experience is that state papers rarely yield direct evidence of personal motives like power-seeking, especially personal power-seeking for its own sake. Such documents are almost always about the game, not about why the players are in the game. They are mostly about which options to pursue or strategy to follow in relation to particular objectives. Researchers must read between the lines, as Nguyen herself points out, to tease out deeper personal motives, and that process presents its own difficulties and problems.

Concerning Le Duan's position on one of the most important issues of the war, William J. Duiker has written that "he was totally devoted to the task of bringing about national reunification, but he was also a pragmatist."⁹ The point for me is that Le Duan may have wanted power for its own sake, but he also wanted power because he was devoted to bringing about national reunification and thought he knew how to achieve it. Moreover, there were other Vietnamese who were equally committed to this goal.

Nixon (and his right-hand man, Henry Kissinger) also sought power, but he also believed in long-standing U.S. goals regarding Vietnam, including credibility, however abstract and flawed that concept is or may have been compared to such deep-seated, concrete, and emotional goals as national reunification and the ousting of foreign occupiers. Like Le Duan, Nixon was a pragmatist, and in the end he and Le Duan—the Nixon administration and the politburo in Hanoi—compromised in Paris and persuaded or forced their southern Vietnamese clients to go along.

To better understand why this war continued to be fought during the 1969 to 1973 Le Duan/Nixon phase of the war, and why the two sides (or four sides, if you will) took the negotiating positions they did, we should focus on the policy issues dividing the warring states and parties. Put simply, and regardless of personal motives, the Republic of [South] Vietnam and its supporters wanted political independence and economic modernization under a noncommunist government. The Democratic Republic of [North] Vietnam, its supporters, and the National Liberation Front wanted reunification and modernization under some form of Communist or socialist system, while ridding Vietnam of what they considered neocolonialism and exploitative landlordism. Within both regions of Vietnam, loyal and dissident factions argued over how best to attain these goals.

Regarding Nguyen's second big question as to what the policies and strategies of the warring sides were, she argues that Le Duan consistently chose aggressive "war" over "peace" until the U.S./South Vietnamese "defeat" (see, e.g., 258) of Hanoi's 1972 Spring-Summer Offensive (aka Easter Offensive) compelled him to change course in the Paris negotiations. The offensive itself, she argues, was Le Duan's flawed attempt to counter his

⁸ See, for example, 3.

⁹ William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000), 492.

military setbacks on the ground since 1968 and what she considers to have been Nixon's successful triangular diplomacy. It is only when Nguyen is well into the book that she makes it clear that the "peace" that Le Duan rejected before 1972 is the kind of peace Nixon and Kissinger defined in the period from 1969 to 1971 as an "honorable" negotiated settlement, the key terms of which included mutual troop withdrawals from South Vietnam and the maintenance of Thieu in power in Saigon (e.g., 131).

Unfortunately absent from Nguyen's account is a sufficiently thorough discussion of the proverbial elephant in the room: the escalating U.S. contribution to the origins and continuance of the Second Indochina War since at least the Geneva Accords of 1954 (not to mention the U.S. role in the First Indochina War after the August Revolution of 1945). Subsequently, between 1969 and 1971, the Nixon administration's terms at the Paris negotiations (which were consistent with those of the Johnson administration¹⁰), were designed to provide Thieu with what U.S. planners called "assured control"¹¹ of South Vietnam and prevent or postpone national reunification under Hanoi's aegis. One can agree or disagree with this U.S. aim yet at the same time appreciate the decisive causal role that U.S. intervention played in sustaining this war and prolonging the negotiations.

The author gives more critical attention to and places more emphasis on Le Duan's aggressive use of military means to improve Hanoi's position of strength in the negotiations (as with his 1968 Tet and 1972 Easter offensives) than she gives to Nixon's madman theory and his and Kissinger's aggressive use of force, such as the invasions of Cambodia and Laos, expanded bombing throughout Indochina, and LINEBACKER I and II. But both sides deployed a strategy of fight-and-talk, or fight-in-order-to-talk-successfully.

Nguyen's discussion of and commentary on Nixon administration strategy and negotiating goals, as well as on many of the meetings between Kissinger and Le Duc Tho in Paris, is mostly informed by published textual documents in the *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)* volumes on the Vietnam War, as well as on Kissinger's *White House Years*. Although an indispensable source, the *FRUS* volumes are highly selective and those in print and online at the time of the writing of this review do not include a full record of the talks or complete transcripts of the Paris meetings (in the rare cases when the editors have included the transcripts).¹² In commenting upon the negotiations, Nguyen often relies on

¹⁰ See, for example, Memo, Morton Halperin to Clark Clifford, 6 June 1968, subj: Mutual Withdrawal Forces from SVN—Focusing U.S. Negotiating Strategy, folder: Chronological File, Jan–Jul 1968 [2 of 2], box 2: MH 2 Dr. Halperin, Halperin Papers, Lyndon B. Johnson Library.

¹¹ See, for example, Vietnam Policy Alternatives, [ca. December 27, 1968], folder10: Vietnam—RAND, box 3, HAK Administrative and Staff Files—Transition, Henry A. Kissinger Office Files, Nixon Presidential Library.

¹² *FRUS* editors are currently preparing a volume that will include the transcripts of meetings in Paris. The Nixon Presidential Library, of course, houses these records, but many if not all of the transcripts can now be found online in the Digital National Security Archive. *FRUS* volumes also contain edited transcriptions of selected White House conversations on tape, which is as it should be. But Nguyen does not cite these. The taped conversations should be required reading—and listening—for any historian writing about the Nixon administration.

Kissinger's brief reports to Nixon on the meetings, in which he has selectively characterized their substance and tone—or at least their substance and tone as he perceived them and as he wanted to portray them to Nixon. These reports also include his characterizations of Le Duc Tho and Xuan Thuy as insolent and unreasonable and of not negotiating seriously—characterizations Nguyen adopts (e.g., 270). If by seriousness one means a concern for what matters, then both sides were always serious; but it was not until 1971 and especially 1972 that they were both willing to compromise some of their key positions: for the United States, for example, the withdrawal of Northern troops from the South; for Hanoi, the U.S. ouster or non-support of Thieu.

The question is 'why?' Many, and probably even most, wars end without bilateral negotiations: one side defeats the other and imposes the terms of peace, or third parties intervene militarily or diplomatically or are asked by the belligerents to mediate or arbitrate. The conditions for bilateral negotiations arise when decision makers on both sides conclude that their war is more or less deadlocked militarily and has become excessively costly but prefer to exclude third party mediators or arbitrators from talks. However valid this generalization, it is demonstrably true that the two sides in U.S.-Vietnam War turned toward negotiations in 1968 because of their growing appreciation of the military stalemate and the expanding human, economic, political, and international costs. Both sides, however, continued to use military, diplomatic, and political means to alter the balance of power in order to gain leverage in shaping the eventual settlement, including triangular diplomacy vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing.

Nguyen agrees that the January 1973 Agreement represented compromise on both sides, but her explanation of how they got there suggests, like Nixon's and Kissinger's explanations, that Washington was more willing to be reasonable at an earlier period and that it was only the defeat of Le Duan's Easter offensive that forced him to negotiate seriously by mid-1972. I do not agree with that assessment or timeline, and though I agree that the Easter Offensive failed to achieve its maximum goals, it did succeed in winning secondary and tertiary goals: Communist forces now occupied more territory—especially in northern South Vietnam and along the Cambodian border of central South Vietnam—and the southern revolutionary movement had been partially reconstituted in selected areas of South Vietnam, especially in the Mekong Delta. These successes later played a role in the 1975 victory.¹³ Moreover, there were moments in the early stages of the Easter campaign—as White House tapes and other documents indicate—that Nixon and Kissinger thought the war could possibly be lost.

The consequence of a deadlocked war, the Paris Agreement was indeed a compromise. But what is often overlooked or under-emphasized in discussions of this negotiated settlement is that the United States withdrew *all* of its ground, air, and naval forces from the Indochina theatre, leaving no so-called residual forces behind, while the North Vietnamese forces re-introduced into South Vietnam during the Easter Offensive stayed in South Vietnam. Thieu

¹³ Regarding the Mekong Delta, see, e.g., David W. P. Elliott, *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 2003), vol. II, chapter 23.

remained in power in Saigon, but he and his armed forces were on their own. U.S. military re-intervention was logistically, economically, and politically unlikely. Had Nixon been serious about future re-intervention in support of Thieu he would perhaps have done better to have withdrawn from South Vietnam without a negotiated agreement and left some residual forces behind in the Indochina theater. But Nixon and Kissinger wanted a negotiated agreement. Kissinger reminded his boss about the benefits of a negotiated ending to the war, which had long been their strategy, on 18 September 1971. It was a crossroads moment, a time when it seemed their plans were going awry and a frustrated Nixon wanted to ditch their plans, bomb the North, and withdraw all forces. Kissinger wrote:

A negotiated settlement had always been far preferable. . . . A peace settlement would end the war with an act of policy and leave the future of South Vietnam to the historical process. There would be a clear terminal date rather than a gradual [and unilateral] winding down. We could heal the wounds in this country as our men left peace behind on the battlefield and a healthy interval for South Vietnam's fate to unfold.¹⁴

Nixon and Kissinger wanted out of Vietnam. The Paris Agreement, they hoped, would provide Thieu with a chance of surviving, get American POWs released, and provide a "healthy" or 'decent' interval between the U.S. exit and the possible defeat of Thieu's government. This, in fact, is what happened, although Nixon and Kissinger largely succeeded in keeping their strategy secret from Congress, the public, and historians.

¹⁴ Memo, Kissinger to Nixon, 18 September 1971, subj: Vietnam, reproduced in *FRUS: Vietnam*, vol. 7, doc. 257.

Thirty-seven years after the Vietnam War ended, we finally have a study of that event that appreciates the role of the North Vietnamese leaders who waged and won the war. Lien-Hang Nguyen's book is truly pathbreaking in this sense. Unlike most existing works on this war which are U.S.-centric, her book is primarily about Vietnamese actors, mostly North Vietnamese ones. Nguyen shows how the communist side managed to engage the U.S. in total war and why it won. While the bulk of the book focuses on the years from 1968 to 1972, the first three chapters are devoted to North Vietnamese internal politics. These three chapters discuss how Le Duan, the First Secretary of the Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP), rose to his post in the late 1950s and consolidated his power with the collaboration of Le Duc Tho, Nguyen Chi Thanh, To Huu and Tran Quoc Hoan.¹ This faction headed by Duan not only monopolized power at the pinnacle of the North Vietnamese communist state by marginalizing other leaders such as Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap. Le Duan and his collaborators also created a police state that persecuted writers and artists and imprisoned critics of the faction's militant policies. These North Vietnamese leaders appear in the book as go-for-broke gamblers who repeatedly underestimated their enemy and lost one major battle after another. Ultimately, they won the war not because of their military genius nor thanks to their ability to win the hearts and minds of South Vietnamese people, but rather thanks in part to their security apparatus that kept all North Vietnamese in line throughout the ordeal, and in part to their global campaign that secured support from other communist states and that swayed international public opinion in their favor.

By embedding the Vietnam War in the full context of North Vietnamese politics, Lien-Hang Nguyen adds substantially to scholarship on the war. Her book joins others in dispelling the myth of an autonomous Southern revolution by showing how Hanoi maintained tight control over the Southern movement throughout the war.² She is perhaps the first to argue that it was not just President Lyndon Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara but Le Duan's strategy of going for broke which brought American troops into South Vietnam in 1965. In the same vein, President Richard Nixon and National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger were not alone in prolonging the war after 1968; Vietnamese leaders in Hanoi and Saigon for their own reasons also resisted negotiations for peace. Nguyen also is the first scholar to pay attention to the real leaders in North Vietnam during the war,

¹ Le Duc Tho and Nguyen Chi Thanh were members of the VWP's Politburo. Tho headed the Organizational Commission, while General Thanh was a member of the Party Secretariat and the National Defense Council, and (for a few years before his death) Party Secretary of the Central Office of the Party in South Vietnam (COSVN) and Political Commissar of the People's Liberation Army in South Vietnam. Tran Quoc Hoan was an alternate member of the Politburo, Minister of Public Security and a member of the National Defense Council. To Huu was a member of the Secretariat and directed the Ideological and Propaganda Commission.

² For a concise and balanced discussion of the controversy involving Hanoi's leadership over the Southern movement, see William Turley's *The Second Indochina War*, 2nd edition (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 34-45.

namely those in the Duan-Tho faction. Western scholarship to date has been obsessed with colorful figures such as President Ho Chi Minh and General Vo Nguyen Giap who played only marginal roles in key decisions of the war. But Nguyen does more than just reinstating Le Duan and Le Duc Tho in the historiography. She breathes some life into those drab men by offering brief but vivid descriptions of their prominent physical features, for example, Duan's "perennially sad eyes and protruding ears" and Tho's "high cheekbones" (17). Regarding Duan, Nguyen also weaves together her account of this North Vietnamese leader's rise to power with the story of his troubled family life as told by his second, officially unrecognized wife.

Given the available materials, Nguyen certainly could do more to give readers a fuller sense of Le Duan's thinking. The following excerpts from his speech at the 14th Central Committee Plenum in January 1968 on the eve of the Tet Offensive are worth quoting. At this key meeting, Duan observed that

I heard from our southern brothers that the morale of enemy [troops] is very low [bac nhuoc]. They are very scared [of communist troops]. The American 25th Division has been weakened. It will disintegrate if we strike hard in Hue. That's the Americans. The puppet troops are very very weak. I heard that they burst out crying [khoc loc] when under attack by our troops.³

Based on such an assessment of the enemy, Duan argued that the Offensive would pose little risk to communist forces: "In Hanoi [in 1946] our [single] regiment "Trung doan Thu do" attacked [the French] and withdrew [intact] after two months. Now we are in a dominant position [lam chu], our forces will enter Saigon and fight for a few months then [if counterattacked we would] withdraw, no problem..."⁴ Duan promised his comrades that following the Tet Offensive,

soon there will be one government in the north and two in the south: the [existing] National Liberation Front and a new Front. Three but one, like heaven and earth... Our southern brothers have been appointed into positions [in the new government]. [The new] flag is ready, maybe with a yellow star in the middle on a blue stripe surrounded by red, etc. All the programs [for establishing a new government] are ready; everything is ready. The only thing left is to strike, and then to rise up... If we do it very well, keep on fighting in 2, 3, 4 months..., [the enemy] will collapse. Then [after] the cities collapse, the [Saigon government] will be gone. Once it is gone, the American militants will lose their guts to fight.... Following the uprising when a million of people march on the streets [of Saigon], the Americans will lose their will.⁵

³ "Bai phat bieu cua dong chi Le Duan" [Comrade Le Duan's speech], January 1968. Dang Cong San Viet Nam, *Van Kien Dang Toan Tap* [Collected Party Documents, hereafter VKD'TT], v. 29 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2004), 28. Lien-Hang Nguyen cites this speech in her book but does not quote it.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 34-35.

That communist forces paid a dear price for the Tet Offensive is well-known. Not as well-known are the calculations of North Vietnamese leaders as they ordered tens of thousands of their soldiers into a battle in which most would be slaughtered. Duan's own words suggest not only the extent of gross miscalculations in Hanoi but also the crazy, reckless kind of military leader he was: underestimating the enemy to the extreme and making battle plans without thinking of an exit. The fact that Duan doggedly pursued the same failed strategy until 1975 speaks even more about his fanaticism. To the extent that Duan's strategy of going for broke was aimed at American morale, he was right. Yet it was neither American nor Saigon troops, but Johnson and McNamara who quickly lost their will to fight even when few Saigonese rose up to welcome communist troops.

Given the massive risks of the Tet Offensive, it is not surprising that Duan and his militant faction had to mobilize the entire police state into launching a massive wave of arrests targeting potential or past critics of their dangerous policy. Nguyen's description of the terror unleashed by the police state in North Vietnam is one of her book's most important contributions. Her account of the police state in North Vietnam may bolster those who believe that the U.S. had a laudable mission to help the South Vietnamese avoid the fate that befell their North Vietnamese compatriots.⁶ After Hanoi's victory in 1975, tens of thousands of Southern officials, intellectuals, artists and religious leaders were indeed locked up in 'reeducation' camps, many for more than a decade, just like Hoang Minh Chinh and Vu Dinh Huynh who were Le Duan and Ho Chi Minh's former comrades-turned-'revisionists.'⁷ Remarkably the repression continues today 40 years after the war, with one in six working Vietnamese reportedly being employed full-time or part-time by security forces.⁸

Yet Nguyen's account has unclear implications for the question about the winability of the war, another deeply controversial question in the debate about the Vietnam War. On the one hand, her analysis of factionalism in North Vietnam demonstrates that the war was less popular among North Vietnamese than is often assumed, in the sense that many would not seek victory at any costs. Serious strategic mistakes made by Le Duan during the Tet Offensive and opposition to his policies within the North Vietnamese leadership suggests North Vietnamese vulnerabilities that, if fully exploited, may have helped the South Vietnamese and American war efforts. A more aggressive U.S. and South Vietnamese pushback after the Tet Offensive, for example, may have forced Le Duan out of power.

⁶ Of course, whether that mission sufficiently justified sending GIs to fight in the South and B-52s to bomb the North is a different matter. There were numerous ways for the U.S. to have helped South Vietnam without having troops on the ground.

⁷ See the most recent and highly acclaimed account by a Vietnam-based journalist, Huy Duc, *Ben Thang Cuoc* [The winning party] (Amazon Digital Services: OsinBook, 2012), vol. 1, chapter 2. This book currently exists only in electronic form.

⁸ Bill Hayton, *Vietnam: Rising Dragon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 73, citing an estimate by Carl Thayer of the Australian Defense Force Academy.

Duan's vulnerability was displayed in his speech at the 16th Central Committee Plenum of the Vietnam Workers Party in May 1969. In this speech, Le Duan for the first time reluctantly admitted the costs of the war in human, social, economic and political terms.⁹ These costs included the great number of casualties ("140,000 wounded and killed" in the North for 1965-1969), corruption [hong] in the party ("2-3 percent out of one million members"), pervasive poverty and a vibrant black market ("up to 1,000 children thieves working Hanoi streets"), and declining agricultural production.¹⁰ By being forthcoming with the costs, Duan apparently hoped to preempt any challenges from his critics following the costly Tet Offensive. Forcing Duan out would mean not the defeat of North Vietnam but rather an improved chance of lasting peace.

On the other hand, given Duan and Tho's success in muzzling dissent regarding their policy before the Tet Offensive, and given Ho Chi Minh and Vo Nguyen Giap's cowardice in failing to confront Duan and Tho to protect their 'revisionist' associates or subordinates, it is hard to imagine who else would have been able to force the militants out. As long as Duan and Tho were in charge, their obstinacy and the effective security apparatus under their control implied a formidable will and ability to mobilize and fight to the last North Vietnamese if necessary. North Vietnam lost about one million troops in the war out of a population of less than 20 million (an equivalent number of casualties for the US in 1970 would have been 10 million). To have defeated such a determined group of revolutionaries and their effective war machine would have required enormous human sacrifices, which would have been difficult to justify under any circumstances.

Even though her book is primarily for Vietnam War scholars, Nguyen's contribution to Vietnamese studies is not insignificant. The oppressive nature of the North Vietnamese system, the domination of the Duan-Tho faction in the North Vietnamese leadership, and the purge of their opponents and critics in 1967 are common knowledge among Vietnam experts, but the book provides a fuller analysis of North Vietnamese politics and the political system in the 1960s than most of the existing accounts in English. Vietnam experts are certainly indebted to her extensive analysis of the North Vietnam's public security apparatus which still deeply penetrates Vietnamese society today. Nguyen also brings to the table many fresh sources such as the self-published memoir of Le Duan's unofficial wife, Nguyen Thuy Nga, as well as various other official publications or studies of the war in the Vietnamese language.

For those who study Vietnam, Lien-Hang Nguyen does not challenge so much as expose the embarrassing gaps in our knowledge about North Vietnamese politics. While Nguyen has offered the best account thus far based on available sources, she can say little about the particular roles of many Politburo members in the decision-making process, including Truong Chinh, Pham Van Dong, Pham Hung, Nguyen Duy Trinh and Le Thanh Nghi. Did they

⁹ "Bai noi cua dong chi Le Duan ... ve nhiem vu cach mang mien Nam" [Comrade Le Duan's speech on the revolutionary tasks in the South], May 1969. VKD TT, v. 30 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2004),.

¹⁰ Ibid., 156-164.

just acquiesce in the Duan-Tho faction's militant policy, or did they actively support it? Nguyen's account of the public security apparatus is the best to date, but is far from complete.¹¹ For example, the extensive gulag system and the widespread use of informants throughout North Vietnam for political surveillance still await future research.

More broadly, *Hanoi's War* suggests the need for a study of the Vietnamese communist revolution of which the Vietnam War was only a phase. Nguyen's argument that Le Duan placed top priority on waging war in the South is true. Nevertheless, socialism was important to Duan and all his comrades, whether they were 'North-firsters' or 'South-firsters.' In internal documents, Duan actually viewed the war in the South not simply as a war for reunification but as a revolution to overthrow American "neocolonialists" and Southern Vietnamese "oppressive feudal dictatorship."¹² He vowed that victory would come for the causes of not only national unity and independence but also communism.¹³ He called for revolution in the South but at the same time supported socialist building in the North, which also was defined as a class struggle (against domestic "reactionary classes" and a "backward small-holding peasantry").¹⁴ Duan was at the forefront of those calling for rural collectivization in the late 1950s as well as for the development of heavy industries in North Vietnam in the early 1960s.

Within the context of the Vietnamese revolution, a study of the communist worldview of the Vietnamese revolutionaries would help explain their tendency to go for broke that Nguyen analyzes so well. In the same vein, the belief in Karl Marx's teaching that revolution is the work of the masses would explain Le Duan's dogged attempts to wage a political struggle in Southern cities after 1964 despite repeated failures. Finally, Nguyen argues that North Vietnam's global campaign to mobilize world support for its war efforts was central to its victory over the US. She does not explain why North Vietnam succeeded in this campaign while its Southern enemy failed, but a partial answer to this question can be found in the internationalist worldview of North Vietnamese leaders. In this worldview, their struggle with the US was not merely a war for national independence and unification, but a component of the worldwide revolutionary movement led by the Soviet Union and taking place not only in the developing world but also in the capitalist countries.¹⁵ This

¹¹ Christopher Goscha's *Vietnam: Un Etat né de la Guerre 1945-1954*, trans. Agathe Larcher (Paris: Armand Colin, 2011), chapter 6 traces the origins of this agency up to 1954.

¹² Le Duan, "Duong loi cach mang mien Nam" [The revolutionary line in the South], August 1956. VKD'TT, v. 17 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2002), 787-8, 795-7, 814-5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 805-6.

¹⁴ Le Duan, "Bao cao chinh tri cua Ban Chap hanh Trung uong Dang" [Political Report of the Party Central Committee], Third Party Congress, September 5, 1960. VKD'TT, v. 21 (Hanoi: Chinh tri Quoc gia, 2002), esp. 541-543,

¹⁵ Le Duan, "Nhung nhiem vu lich su cua phong trao cong san quoc te," [The historical tasks of the international communist movement], *Hoc Tap* no. 12 (December 1957), 12-28.

internationalist worldview motivated them to invest in influencing world opinion and to define their struggle in a way that would maximize world support. In 1963 when they authorized the escalation of war in the South, they decided to frame the Southern movement in public not as a communist revolution as they thought it really was, but as an “anti-American struggle for national independence, democracy, peace and neutrality.”¹⁶ A secret Party resolution explained that this decision was made so as (1) not to provoke the U.S. into full-scale intervention on the pretext of stopping communism; (2) not to alienate the southern capitalist class; (3) to court support from neutral countries, and (4) to divide France and the U.S.¹⁷ This deception failed to prevent US intervention but worked as far as international public opinion was concerned. South Vietnamese leaders, by contrast, did not have a global strategy. They viewed the communist bloc as a monolithic group and made no efforts to sow resentment and division within the communist camp. Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai’s interest in opening a liaison office in Saigon in 1954 was rebuffed by President Ngo Dinh Diem. In hindsight it is obvious that even a low-key relationship with Beijing could have helped Saigon in numerous ways.

To conclude, *Hanoi’s War* places the North and (to a lesser extent) the South Vietnamese at the center of their war, where they rightly belong. Thanks to Lien-Hang Nguyen, we now understand more fully how the war was waged by North Vietnam and how it was won. But the book contributes in another, more important, way. Vietnamese studies and Vietnam War scholarship often ignore each other. Nguyen has boldly brought these two fields together while challenging both of them.

¹⁶ “Nghị quyết Hội nghị lần thứ chín Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam” [Resolution of the 9th Central Committee Plenum of the Vietnam Workers’ Party], December 1963. VKDĐT, v. 24 (Hanoi: Chính trị Quốc gia, 2003), 819.

¹⁷ Ibid.

Over thirty-five years after the end of the Vietnam War, Lien-Hang Nguyen's new book *Hanoi's War: an International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* stands as the first full-length research monograph published in the United States about the broad history of Vietnamese communist policy towards the conflict.¹ The stunning belatedness of this effort reflects the appalling America-centrism of Vietnam War Studies in the United States. But, to be fair, it also stems from the difficulty of researching the topic given the Vietnamese party-state's refusal to open its archives or to permit public criticism of either its policies or its history. As Nguyen demonstrates, however, sufficient material does exist to address many aspects of communist policy toward the war. This material takes the form of limited archival collections, interviews and oral histories, the period Vietnamese-language press, and a small trove of memoirs, published diaries and secondary scholarship produced in Vietnam and in Vietnamese communities overseas. As with many important and pioneering books, *Hanoi's War's* most enduring contribution to the existing scholarship will likely be the extraordinary body of primary research that it presents in its seventy-five pages of citations and twenty-five pages of bibliography.

In terms of its interpretations and insights, however, *Hanoi's War* offers a mixed bag. Many of its major arguments have been circulating, in one form or another, for decades and the poverty of new corroborating documentation frequently prevents Nguyen from advancing the existing discourse. The unevenness of the text partially reflects the unevenness of the source base but it also reflects the raw intellectual quality of a lightly revised dissertation inadequately edited by the University of North Carolina Press. With a stronger editorial hand, the book would have been half as long and twice as clear. It would also focus exclusively on the subject named in its title – *Hanoi's War* – and it would prune several late chapters on the trilateral negotiations to end the War between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) and the United States. Not only has this story been treated effectively in previous scholarship (as in the excellent work of Larry Berman) but it distracts attention from the book's main contribution: the domestic political history of Hanoi's approach to the war.²

Nguyen advances three important theses. The first concerns the nature of the Vietnamese communist political elite and its policy-making process. In most textbook accounts, this group is portrayed as an efficient decision-making collective whose cohesion derived from

¹ The nearest thing may be the solidly orthodox books of William Duiker: *Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam* (Boulder, Co.: Westview Press, 1996), *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2001). But the much more limited source-base of Duiker's work makes it a qualitatively different animal than *Hanoi's War*.

² Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 2002). For additional recent work that addresses the domestic history of the War from Hanoi's perspective, see the following essays from a special issue of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* Vol. 4, Issue 3 (Fall 2009) edited by Edward Miller and Tuong Vu: François Guillemot, "Death and Suffering at First Hand: Youth Shock Brigades during the Vietnam War (1950-1975)," 17-60, and Bussarawan Teerawichitchainan, "Trends in Military Service in Northern Vietnam, 1950-1995: A Sociodemographic Approach," 61-97.

the similar backgrounds and ideological commitments of its members. While many histories hypothesize the presence of pro-Soviet and pro-Chinese figures within the Politburo, they also insist that widely-shared nationalist and anti-imperialist sentiments kept these divisive ‘tendencies’ in check.³ Unanimous deference to the charismatic authority of Hồ Chí Minh is said to have contributed further to the smooth functioning of the Vietnamese communist elite. In contrast, Nguyen describes the DRV establishment as “wracked with dissension and division” (81) and held together by the iron hand of the distinctly uncharismatic Party General Secretary Lê Duẩn. The priority assigned to Lê Duẩn is original but it is never fully realized or verified, a shortcoming which makes it unlikely that *Hanoi’s War’s* novel interpretation of this figure will be fully accepted as the authoritative take on the subject.

Nguyen’s belief in the persistence and significance of factions within the Vietnam Workers Party (VWP) distinguishes *Hanoi’s War* from most narrative accounts of the Vietnam conflict. But this general point is relatively well-known thanks to credible memoirs by mid-level party figures that have been available in print for decades.⁴ Since a degree of divisiveness in any large organization should come as no surprise, the scholarly task at hand is no longer to assert the existence of factions but to explore their origins, character and dynamics. Here, *Hanoi’s War* provides only limited insight. While it mentions a range of factions within the Party dating back to World War Two, its basic story concerns three durable blocs which remained at odds with each other during the better part of the war. The dominant faction -- referred to alternatively as the ‘South-firsters,’ the ‘militant faction,’ ‘the apparatchiks’ and the ‘hawks’ -- was led by Party bosses Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ and included the generals Nguyễn Chí Thanh and Văn Tiến Dũng, the cultural czar Tố Hữu, the southern-based official Phạm Hùng and the fearsome police chief Trần Quốc Hoàn. Consistent with the multiple labels applied to it, this group prioritized conquest of the South through armed-struggle over all other policy concerns including the development of the northern Vietnamese economy. It succeeded in realizing its ambitions by silencing domestic political opponents through blackmail, purges, and extra-judicial arrest and imprisonment.

In Nguyen’s account, the victory of the militantly hawkish South-firsters came at the expense of a second high-level faction known as ‘the North-firsters’ or ‘the moderates.’ This group – which advocated greater attention to nation-building in the North - eventually found common cause with “mid-level north-first officials,” (49) referred to at different points in the war as “the peace faction” (49) and the “pro-negotiations faction” (77). Many members of this sub-faction were persecuted by Lê Duẩn’s ‘police state’ and purged during

³ Early exponents of this view include P.J Honey and Bernard Fall. See P.J. Honey, *Communism in North Vietnam : Its Role in the Sino-Soviet Dispute* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963) and Bernard Fall “Power and Pressure Groups in North Vietnam,” in P.J. Honey (ed.) *North Vietnam Today: Profile of a Communist Satellite* (New York: Praeger, 1962): 60-70.

⁴ The best known example in the West is Bùi Tín, *Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel*. Translated from the Vietnamese and adapted by Judy Stowe and Do Van (University of Hawaii, 1995) originally printed as *Hoa xuyên tuyết* (Nhân Quyền, 1991).

the mid 1960s. The three leading North-firsters were Hồ Chí Minh, General Võ Nguyên Giáp and Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng. Their ill-fated mid-level allies included Hoàng Minh Chính, Bùi Công Trùng, Dương Bạch Mai, Ung Văn Khiêm, Lê Liêm, Đặng Kim Giang, Nguyễn Văn Vịnh, Lê Trọng Nghĩa, Vũ Đình Huỳnh, and Vũ Thư Hiên.

Hanoi's War's discussion of a third communist faction – “the indigenous southern revolutionary leadership” (49) – suffers from the same weaknesses that plague treatments of this nebulous group in most orthodox histories. It fails to identify the group’s operational leadership or to convincingly demonstrate its agency as an autonomous political force. It also provides an exasperatingly unclear account of the complex interplay between southern agency and northern manipulation that led to its institutional transformation into the National Liberation Front (NLF). “The creation of the NLF in 1960,” the book explains, “was a northern response to genuine peasant uprisings at the village level in the southern countryside; it was a construct poised to reap the success of the spontaneous agitation and portray it as a ‘concerted uprising [dong khoi nghia]’ orchestrated by communist cells under the direction of the VWP.” (52) Needless to say, this critical and highly controversial issue deserves to be treated with greater clarity, rigor and precision.

The treatment of factions in *Hanoi's War* exhibits additional problems. Because it eschews intellectual biography, *Hanoi's War* fails to explain why members of different factions embraced the projects that they did. This shortcoming is most pressing in the case of Lê Duẩn, whose ruthless pursuit of ‘total war’ in the South and total political compliance in the North seems to stem from little more than a frustratingly vague reservoir of personal ambition. Although far from an open book, the broad outlines of Lê Duẩn’s political thought and general intellectual orientation (including the relative significance in his thinking of nationalism, anti-colonialism, Marxism, Stalinism and Maoism) might be divined through a close reading of his anthologized writing and speeches – a move that *Hanoi's War* neglects to undertake. In place of a sustained, searching, or creative effort to figure out what made Lê Duẩn tick, *Hanoi's War* provides a potted overview of his official biography and a salacious subplot about his polygamous married life - neither of which helps to explain his militancy or his leadership of the South-firsters. A similar superficiality bedevils *Hanoi's War's* treatment of the intellectual and/or biographical forces driving the other major factional protagonists in the narrative including, most frustratingly, Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp and Lê Đức Thọ.

Another problem with the account of factional politics presented in *Hanoi's War* is the way that it repackages, and reinvigorates, an overly benign view of Hồ Chí Minh that has been dominant in the scholarly literature (and much journalistic writing) since the Vietnam War. In contrast to the widely respected Uncle Hồ described in most orthodox histories, *Hanoi's War* depicts the Vietnamese communist leader as moderate and cautious (and frequently ineffectual), a view that dovetails with the portrayal offered in an equally redemptive recent biographical study by Sophie Quinn-Judge.⁵ But this view rests on a thin and

⁵ Sophie Quinn-Judge, *Ho Chi Minh: The Missing Years, 1919-1941* (Berkeley: University of California, 2003).

selective body of empirical evidence and ignores recent scholarship that highlights the hawkish militancy of Hồ Chí Minh's public rhetoric and likely policy preferences during the final two decades of his life.⁶

A second important thesis of *Hanoi's War* is its insistence that the VWP's military policies in the South were partially determined by the broader economic and political situation in the North. This argument corrects for a persistent asymmetry in the existing scholarship which emphasizes the role of domestic politics in the evolution of American policy towards Vietnam while ignoring analogous dynamics on the communist side. In making the case, *Hanoi's War* suggests that the South-firsters were motivated, at least in part, by a desire to provide a distraction from a botched land reform, a bungled collectivization, the revisionist Nhân Văn - Giai Phẩm movement, and persistent economic difficulties that generated anxiety within the highest levels of the VWP. Given the inaccessibility of archival material on the workings of the Politburo during this period, it is understandable that the linkage between military policy and domestic politics in the DRV is asserted in *Hanoi's War* but never persuasively demonstrated. Still, as virtually every account of the American intervention in Vietnam has shown, linkages between these two policy spheres may be thoughtfully explored (despite the absence of archival 'smoking guns') through thick description and careful attention to circumstantial evidence such as the precise timing of various events and the overlapping portfolios of domestic and foreign policy managers. Such an approach would be preferable to the bold but largely unsubstantiated claim made in *Hanoi's War* that Lê Duẩn's forward policy "appeared to solve the party's immediate woes not only in the North but also in the South" (47).

Hanoi's War third important thesis is that the unfolding of the conflict coincided with the erection of a highly repressive "police state" (55) in the DRV. The fragments of this story related in *Hanoi's War* are relatively new and potentially important for understanding key dynamics of the War. Nguyen identifies Trần Quốc Hoàn as the architect of the DRV police state and provides insight into his paranoid world-view through snippets of his harsh public rhetoric about saboteurs, traitors, class enemies, CIA spies, and Catholics. She also usefully describes the institutional development of overlapping agencies dedicated to internal 'public security' and she chronicles a handful of campaigns launched against political opponents of the South-firsters and allegedly subversive underground organizations. As in other sections of the book, however, source limitations prevent the realization of a truly satisfactory analysis. To cite one example, Nguyen refers, as if in passing, to 12,000 individuals sent to re-education camps during the late 1950s under a new draconian law to "crush sabotage and disruption" (56). The citation intriguingly references an official Vietnamese source for this remarkable bit of information but *Hanoi's War* moves on to another topic without pursuing the issue further. This is unfortunate, for even if additional data is not forthcoming, evidence of such a massive campaign of domestic repression deserves deeper consideration for what it reveals about critical broader issues

⁶ Tuong Vu, "To be Patriotic is to Build Socialism': Communist Ideology in Vietnam's Civil War," in Tuong Vu and Wasana Wongsurawat eds., *Dynamics of the Cold War in Asia: Ideology, Identity and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

in the history of the War such as the nature of popular support for the communist cause or the relative levels of repression in the DRV and the RVN.

Despite its shortcomings, *Hanoi's War* will unquestionably be among the first pieces of secondary scholarship cited in subsequent research on the topic and the myriad questions that it raises will absorb the attention of scholars who follow in its pioneering wake. It will also encourage 'international historians' of the Vietnam War to build domestic politics into their accounts of interstate relations and to take seriously Vietnamese-language sources as a resource for understanding the history of this tragic and still poorly understood conflict.

Author's Response by Lien-Hang Nguyen, University of Kentucky

I would like to thank Tom Maddux for his enduring patience while putting together this roundtable as well as the panel of distinguished reviewers for taking the time to review my book.

No two scholars of the Vietnam War – be they Americanists, area studies experts, or international historians – will think alike regarding any one study of that conflict. This is a blessing and a curse: a blessing because this indicates that our field is thriving in numbers and diversity; a curse because our differing viewpoints and approaches often mire us in endless debate. The roundtable underscores this point. While all the reviewers found different aspects of *Hanoi's War* to commend or criticize, there were also instances in which one reviewer's criticism was another reviewer's commendation.

But on one point there is near universal agreement. Nearly all of the reviewers declare that *Hanoi's War* is an important history, one that is “pathbreaking,” “pioneering,” “seminal,” and “soon-to-be a “classic”. While there are many studies devoted to the Vietnam War, the vast majority focus on U.S. intervention since the ‘bamboo hedge’ continues to shroud much of Hanoi's decision-making throughout the war. As a result, despite the sheer number of studies on the conflict, we are left with a vague understanding of the Vietnamese communist struggle (we do not know, for instance, who was in charge, how they managed to go to war, what their objectives and strategies were, or how their military, diplomatic, and political machinery really defeated the United States). And so while Jeffrey Kimball is correct to point out that many “professional historians, serious journalists, veterans, and former diplomats from many countries” have written about the “other side,” *Hanoi's War* is one of the first, but thankfully will not be the last, full-length studies based on extensive historical research on the Vietnamese communist war effort. The vast majority of these writers who addressed aspects of Hanoi's conflict lacked linguistic skills, did not have access to the recent wave of more candid secondary studies from Vietnam, suffered from censorship by the government, or most importantly were not privy to archival and classified Vietnamese-language sources.

Moreover, Kimball, who describes my book as “much anticipated,” suggests that perhaps the book did not quite deliver. He asserts that my international history is neither novel nor perhaps even that international or transnational in scope. I beg to differ. Using never-before-seen documents from Vietnam, my book addresses Hanoi's foreign relations during the war, its negotiation strategy against the United States, and its global campaign to defeat its enemies on the world stage. In doing so, I chronicle not only North Vietnam's relations with China, the Soviet Union, and the socialist bloc, but also South Vietnamese communist efforts to win over the antiwar movement in the West as well as the Non-Aligned movement and the Third World more generally. Moreover, in the second half of the book, I turn my attention to the Nixon administration's superpower diplomacy as well as the Saigon regime's regional politics. If this does not qualify as international history, albeit more from of a revolutionary Third World standpoint rather than a Western one, I am not sure what would

Although Kimball may not have been persuaded by the arguments and contributions of *Hanoi's War*, Pierre Asselin is. Every author hopes for a reader who 'gets it,' and Asselin does. This is most satisfying to me since Asselin set the standard for international histories of the Vietnam peace negotiations with his monograph, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement*.¹ I owe much to his pioneering work. Identifying three strengths of my book, Asselin commends me for providing the best existing discussion of the inner workings of the Hanoi leadership, chronicling the "poorly documented" intra-Party rivalries, and placing the little-known and inscrutable Vietnam Workers' Party (VWP) First Secretary Le Duan rightfully in the center of much of the narrative. Although the Hanoi leadership during the war (and after) presented itself as a collective decision-making body under the benevolent guidance of Ho Chi Minh, I argue that there were power struggles within the Politburo and factionalization (along the divide generated by the Sino-Soviet split) within the VWP more generally. Le Duan, a little-known figure in the West compared to Ho or General Vo Nguyen Giap, came to dominate this fractious political scene by the late 1950s. Rising to the top due in no small part to his steely determination, organizational prowess, and cutthroat leadership style, Le Duan, with the help of Le Duc Tho and other apparatchik deputies, placed the country on the path to war in the South and constructed a police state in the North by the early 1960s. Although there were Party members who did not want to become bogged down in a southern war, preferring instead to focus on the socialist transformation of the economy and achieving reunification through peaceful means, the 'comrades Le' achieved their controversial objectives in late 1963. By silencing powerful opponents such as Ho who opposed his policies, Le Duan received a carte blanche for war and outlined a risky politico-military strategy for victory known as the General Offensive and General Uprising (GO-GU). This strategy was not universally accepted; Party military leaders and southern revolutionaries fighting on the front opposed the GO-GU, viewing it as too risky. Nonetheless, Le Duan proceeded to implement this strategy not once but three times over the course of the war (1964, 1968, and 1972), at great costs to the revolution.

Strengths aside, Asselin identifies some potential drawbacks of my book. First, he questions my subtitle, "the international war for peace in Vietnam." I purposely juxtaposed "war" and "peace" since I argue that neither Hanoi, nor Washington and Saigon, were interested in negotiating a viable peace settlement. Peace, for the leaders in charge in Hanoi, would come only by toppling the Saigon regime. Second, Asselin points to some ambiguity regarding when Le Duan began his war against the Saigon regime. I argue that he set that ball in motion as early as late 1959-early 1960 when the Party leadership gave him a cautious green light to incorporate armed conflict alongside the political struggle in the South. Although Asselin is right to argue that the Ninth Plenum of late 1963 marks the time when Le Duan received the go-ahead for full-scale war, I view that plenum as the culmination of efforts that began several years earlier. Third, Asselin might have misread my argument regarding the impact of U.S. President Richard Nixon's Christmas bombings

¹ Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

in late 1972. I argue that Le Duan, who had only begun to negotiate seriously (i.e. with the intent to produce an immediate settlement and not as a means to buy time) in the summer of 1972, hoped to avoid another round of Nixon's bombing. In that, he failed when Nixon launched Linebacker II.

Carolyn Eisenberg's insightful review raises a very profound point: by using a "top-down" approach that privileges diplomacy and state-to-state relations, I unwittingly placed North Vietnam and the United States – and the destruction they wrought in South Vietnam – on the same level. Kimball agrees and laments the focus on Hanoi at the expense of discussing the "decisive causal role that U.S. intervention played in sustaining this war and prolonging negotiations." At the end of the day, the United States, Eisenberg reminds us, was clearly the external power that tried to impose its will upon a foreign people by using overwhelming military, economic, and technological superiority. She is absolutely right. Although my depiction of the Hanoi leadership reveals that the men in charge were more repressive and less popular than has been previously understood, in no way should my book be seen as attempting to dislodge the widely-held opinion that the United States had no business being in Vietnam. Moreover, as my critical treatment of the Nixon administration shows, the United States was equally to blame for the failure of peace in 1973.

Eisenberg also questions whether my focus on the diplomatic events of 1971-1972 blinded me to the military realities on the ground and led me to make faulty arguments concerning Vietnamese communist decision-making in this crucial period. Rather, I contend that one must look at both spheres in conjunction, just as Hanoi's leaders did at the time, in order to discern North Vietnamese actions. Hanoi's 'talking while fighting' policy in the post-Tet war had two objectives: topple the Saigon regime and force the Americans out. While many in the Party wanted to place more emphasis on negotiating the Americans out, Le Duan did not place much confidence in diplomacy and was convinced that his politico-military strategy could defeat the Saigon regime once and for all. It was only in the summer of 1972 when two developments forced him to reorder his objectives: the failure of the Easter Offensive to defeat the Saigon forces on the battlefield, and Nixon's ability to get the Chinese and Soviets to pressure the North Vietnamese to compromise at the negotiating table. Eisenberg proposes instead that perhaps Hanoi's military superiority on the battlefield by 1972 allowed North Vietnamese leaders to conclude a peace settlement from a position of strength. This argument, which has also been advanced in Vietnamese official histories, in my opinion ignores the evidence that points to the more distressing military and diplomatic reality that forced Le Duan's hand. At the end of the day, until we have more definitive evidence from the Party archives, scholars will have to agree to disagree.

While Kimball and Eisenberg would have preferred to have seen more attention paid to U.S. actions, Peter Zinoman would have preferred less discussion of American activities entirely. Moreover, Zinoman also criticizes the book's writing and editing. In this, he seems to be in the minority as the greater number of readers and reviewers have praised *Hanoi's War*. External affirmation aside, Zinoman contends that the entire second half of *Hanoi's War* was unnecessary. In his estimation, the trilateral negotiations and endgame has already been treated effectively in previous scholarship. While Zinoman cites Larry

Berman's excellent work, he fails to mention the monumental contributions of two reviewers on this roundtable, Asselin's *A Bitter Peace* and Kimball's *Nixon's Vietnam War*.² The actual state of the historiography on the topic is that while there is a growing body of impressive scholarship on the peace negotiations, *Hanoi's War* is the first full-length monograph to utilize the currently classified five-volume series by the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Dai su ky chuyen de: Dau tranh ngoai giao va van dong quoc te trong nhung chien chong My cuu nuoc* [*Special Chronology: The Diplomatic Struggle and International Activities of the Anti-American Resistance for National Salvation*] (*DTNG*), that provides a never-seen-before glimpse into Hanoi's war diplomacy. Since the Vietnamese Foreign Ministry Archives are closed to scholars, the importance of these volumes should not be understated. Other reviewers agree: Kimball states he can attest to their value since he had access to translated excerpts while Asselin has read all five volumes in Vietnamese and provides us with the best explanation of *DTNG*'s importance in his review. Although Zinoman is without a doubt one of the leading experts on Vietnamese history, his review fails to appreciate the significance of this major archival coup. *DTNG*, along with a wealth of archival documents, interviews, and other materials, prompted me to argue that Nixon's triangular diplomacy succeeded to an extent: Nixon managed to bring Chinese and Soviet pressure to bear on North Vietnam at the negotiating table by the summer of 1972. *DTNG* reveals that Le Duan and his comrades in the Politburo were angry, and desperate, in the face of the U.S. *détente* with the Soviet Union and the American rapprochement with China. However, Hanoi was ultimately able to shield itself from superpower machinations by utilizing 'weapons of the weak,' including transnational people's diplomacy, small power manipulation, and revolutionary guerilla politics on the global stage, particularly in the wake of Nixon's unpopular Christmas Bombings in late 1972. Le Duan, the man who deeply distrusted negotiations and placed little stock in the diplomatic sphere, underestimated the strength of Hanoi's political arsenal in winning the war for peace on the global stage. The *DTNG* allowed me to reveal how Washington's great power politics squared off against Hanoi's small power diplomacy: Nixon won the battle but lost the war.

While Zinoman criticizes my analysis of domestic northern Vietnamese politics, Tuong Vu praises *Hanoi's War* for providing a "fuller analysis of North Vietnamese politics and the political system in the 1960s than most of the existing accounts in English" and "dispelling the myth of an autonomous Southern revolution." My discussion of Le Duan's police state, according to Vu, is one of the book's most important contributions. Moreover, Vu moves beyond the old orthodox-revisionist debates. He discusses the ramifications of my book on the winnability of the war debate, asking whether in order to win the war, the United States could have exploited the fact that Le Duan, Le Duc Tho, and their deputies held policies that were so unpopular that they needed to resort to repressive measures to suppress dissent in North and South Vietnam. Vu and I agree that the answer is 'no.' The ruling clique under Duan enjoyed maximum maneuverability. No one in North Vietnam (or Russia or China) was going to overthrow them and no southern rivals were going to usurp command of the war. Le Duan was there to stay. Even more importantly, Vietnam was never a token for the

² Larry Berman, *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* (New York: Free Press, 2001); Jeffrey Kimball, *Nixon's Vietnam War* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998).

United States to win or to lose. American intervention only hardened positions in Hanoi and helped bolster Le Duan's empire.

Vu's criticisms, which revolve around the figure of Le Duan, are also well-taken and correspond to some of the other reviewers' comments, including Asselin's wish that I had addressed Le Duan's ideology. In particular, Vu suggests that I should have incorporated more of Le Duan's speeches to support my arguments concerning his ruthless leadership style and perhaps should have placed Le Duan's thinking in a larger Vietnamese communist worldview during the Cold War and beyond. Although Kimball, who disagrees with my portrayal of Le Duan as a driven and cutthroat leader, doubts whether Vietnamese state sources can reveal much regarding the inner psyche of the man, the quotations that Vu include in his review speak otherwise. Instead Kimball tends to agree with William Duiker who, without the benefit of recent Vietnamese-language documents, sees Le Duan as a pragmatist.³ Le Duan was a pragmatist, Kimball contends, in the same way that Nixon and Henry Kissinger were. Vu's quotations from Le Duan and his forthcoming book on Vietnamese communism in the latter half of the twentieth century, combined with the wealth of evidence that I shepherded from classified sources, archives, national libraries, and publishing houses in Vietnam, however, reveal that Le Duan chose war, and chose to wage a specific type of war, one that sacrificed hundreds of thousands if not millions, of Vietnamese, when other options were available. He ignored, marginalized, and threatened more moderate leaders who dissented. He did so because he, like his counterparts in Washington, was more concerned with power and his legacy. We must be able to accept that these traits are not unique to western presidents of imperialist countries, but also plagued some of the revolutionary leaders of third-world national liberation struggles.

Just as the war divided Americans, Vietnamese, and the world, its history will continue to evoke debate and argument. Nonetheless, I enjoyed participating in this roundtable and am grateful to the reviewers and H-Diplo for this wonderful opportunity.

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³ William Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh: A Life* (New York: Hyperion, 2000).