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Introduction by John Prados

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Introduction by John Prados, National Security Archive

I open this introduction with a three-paragraph note to readers: I believe the use of the terms ‘revisionist’ and ‘orthodox’ with respect to the history of the Vietnam War has become dysfunctional. The very historians criticized today as orthodox were attacked yesterday for being revisionist. Meanwhile, the historians representing themselves today as revisionist are presenting arguments similar to those of the defenders of the Vietnam War while it was underway. *That* was certainly an orthodox position. It is better to conceive of this school as ‘neo-orthodox.’

Orthodoxy on any subject can change from time *x* to *y* or *z*, but in a case where specific historians and arguments were tabbed in past debates as ‘revisionist,’ those narratives and arguments are best understood in their original milieu. The fact that historical positions held by the revisionists ultimately became the majority view is to those authorities’ credit, but ought not to be construed as making them orthodox, or transform their school of thought into orthodoxy. Discussion loses its clarity when a certain point of view means one thing today and something else tomorrow. This smacks of cultural relativism and leaves the reader in the position of the character Winston Smith in the novel *1984*, where, in fact, the meaning attached to data and information morphs as the nation states alter their political affiliations—precisely what is happening with ‘revisionist’ and ‘orthodox.’

In this text, I shall attempt to avoid using ‘orthodox’ (for the original revisionists). ‘Traditional revisionists’ versus revisionists is too cumbersome and also potentially confusing. ‘Modernists’ for our latter-day revisionists is wrong—this school is representing the message of Vietnam’s Five O’clock Follies as new. Instead I shall employ the term ‘neo-orthodox’ to encapsulate the views of our latter-day revisionists, who Gregory A. Daddis is opposing.

Daddis here contributes a smashing revisioning of the final years of the American war in Vietnam. This is contested terrain, and the author recalls in his introduction what made him write about the war. Daddis, an Army officer at the time, assigned to a high-level staff in Iraq in 2009, found that the only Vietnam War history on officers’ bookshelves was a neo-orthodox tome that argued the United States had *won* the war. That seemed overly simplistic to him and set Daddis off, during the last stages of his military career, on writing. Between stints teaching at West Point, and now, Chapman University, Daddis wrote books on measuring combat effectiveness in the Vietnam War, and on the period when General William C. Westmoreland led U.S. forces in that conflict. This latest work, *Withdrawal*, is something he has been building up to, and it directly confronts the “better war myth,” a term he draws from Lewis B. Sorley’s book of that name, the one Daddis had originally seen on shelves in Iraq¹

In *Withdrawal* Daddis systematically constructs his narrative around demonstrating the mythological nature of neo-orthodox views on victory in Vietnam. The war was not America’s to win or lose. Success at pacification, the heart of Sorley’s thesis, proved ephemeral because the U.S. substituted security for actually dealing with the fears of Vietnamese villagers, then read its data as a measure of victory, not simply a datum. Washington and Saigon followed different paths to glory, or more properly, defeat. Coordinating force with diplomacy was never possible. American military forces had reached the end of their tether. The whole

¹ Lewis B. Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999).

conflict unfolded within a milieu of increasing political opposition in the United States, Vietnamese agency the Americans could do little about, strategies limited by external factors, and a U.S. withdrawal that created insuperable difficulties for South Vietnam. There are many skeins to the Daddis weaving and I shall leave it to the reviewers to draw out more of them.

All of our commentators have situated *Withdrawal* as a riposte to the neo-orthodox school of thought. Robert J. Thompson is complementary, calling *Withdrawal* “the zenith” of what historians have long worked towards. In a similar formulation, Ron Milam declares *Withdrawal* a “masterful book,” adding, “Daddis has written the book that needed to be written about the end of the American war.” Meredith Lair finds *Withdrawal* “a wonderful and wonderfully usable book,” suitable for both undergraduates and grad students. The circle of unanimity is complete with Kevin Boylan, who finds that *Withdrawal* mounts a powerful counterattack against neo-orthodox scholars of the “better war” persuasion. Indeed, the commentators’ unanimity is an indication of the power of this book. All of them laud the author’s broad scope and deep research. All note Daddis’s clear presentation. He essentially grounds each sentence on one or more sources and then writes endnotes that lay out the sources one after another. The reviewers all remark on the extensive endnotes. Lair highlights the internationalization of Vietnam War scholarship and observes that it works well as used here.

Daddis, Lair intimates, provides clarity. She finds the introduction “crystalline,” laying down three themes—Washington’s political grand strategy trumped military strategy that was conceived in South Vietnam; complexity predominated regardless of efforts to cope; and interrelationships between war and society dominated in both the United States and South Vietnam. The author, she observes, combines history, historiography and memory, discussing major engagements, war crimes, pacification, the antiwar movement, POWs, the collapse of morale, and the interplay of grand with applied strategy. Lair believes that one of the best things about the book is the author’s use of measured language, and even tone, to find a middle ground between indictment and endorsement.

There is commonality in the reviewers’ specifics, too. Thompson views Daddis as toppling pillars which once sustained the neo-orthodox vision, including the assertion that pacification was a great success. Thompson observes that arguments regarding pacification are crucial because the strategy and tactics of that form of warfare were the most clearly present at every phase of the conflict, hence revealing continuity. Milam, who actually participated in pacification operations during the command of General Creighton V. Abrams, as a soldier in South Vietnam’s Central Highlands, could make important observations here.

Kevin Boylan is the author of a detailed account of pacification in one province, *Losing Binh Dinh* and thus understandably zeroes in on the military-side arguments in this debate.² He rejects the hypothesis that General Abrams changed Westmoreland’s tactics after taking command. Body count and search-and-destroy remained enshrined in Military Assistance Command Vietnam operations. Abrams emphasized pacification, but Westmoreland had too, as Daddis revealed in his previous book, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*.³ Thompson agrees that *both* Abrams and Westmoreland understood strategy in the same

² Kevin Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969-1971* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016).

³ Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

way, and that both generals pursued the war using similar tactics and operations. Milam observes that Daddis challenges the supposition that U.S. conduct of the war changed with Westmoreland's handover of command to Abrams in 1968. *Withdrawal* acknowledges the limits of American power. Its core, says Lair, is explaining Abrams's decisions and the obstacles which faced him. The Tet Offensive exposed the complexities of a multifaceted war, and brought his appointment. Lair agrees that the author whittles Abrams from supergeneral down to flawed but competent commander. But given the complexities, even Abrams was "unable to reverse, or even arrest, the downward trends . . . that by 1968 had turned into a political-military stalemate" (quoted from Daddis, 9).

Daddis writes that political strategies fashioned in Washington by President Richard Nixon and National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger trumped military ones elaborated by Abrams in Saigon. Abrams's problems were with the Nixon White House, says Thompson. Again our reviewers are in substantial agreement. A strength of *Withdrawal* which Lair observes in several different ways is its juxtaposition of conflicting elements. For example, Abrams was trying to win a war, but his president wanted to get out of Vietnam to pursue other Cold War opportunities. Thus, for Abrams, Vietnamization was a strategy; for Nixon, it was a goal. Nixon's grand strategy undermined Abrams's quest for military victory. Similarly, military escalations (like the invasions of Cambodia and Laos, the mining of Haiphong, the Christmas bombing) increasingly supported negotiations. Boylan finds Daddis's even-handed treatment of the antiwar movement remarkable. The author finds that Nixon in the White House and the protesters on the streets actually had the same objective—to end the war. *Withdrawal* argues that dissent did not dictate Nixon's strategic choices but it did compel the President to reduce the level of carnage.

Daddis, according to Milam, avoids falling into a trap that has ensnared many historians, citing Jerry Lembcke as an example, who reject the neo-orthodox consensus that Vietnam veterans were mistreated when returning from the war.⁴ Milam refers to the late scholar Marilyn Young, who argued that if Vietnam vets *felt* they were stigmatized, that was all that mattered.

Daddis also avoids placing too much blame on the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). He argues that the U.S. Americanized the war, and thus the ARVN is not responsible for losing it?

Boylan makes Nixon, Kissinger, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird the main actors from 1969 on, but, he continues, "what really stands out" is the disconnect between Washington and Saigon that made the command relationship degenerate "to the point of dysfunctionality" (Daddis, 203). So Abrams's war could not and did not matter to his superiors. Plus, and here Boylan and Lair agree, Daddis makes up for a 'better war' myth that only American actions and perspectives mattered by affording Vietnamese more agency.

Milam breaks the 'better war' thesis into component parts. One is that America did not have to lose the war (which is directly disputed by Daddis's view above). A second is that the U.S. military was asked to fight with one hand tied behind its back. The third proposition is that the media and the politicians at home were the ones who lost the war. That neo-orthodox view attained considerable traction. This is apparent from Daddis's own explanation for why he chose to write this book. Daddis traces the components of the 'better war' thesis throughout his book.

⁴ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam* (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

There are some criticisms from our reviewers, as one might expect. Boylan finds places where the Daddis critique would be more effective if he had extended his analysis further, putting more flesh on his presentation. The points of most concern come from Lair and concern the ‘decent interval’ argument, sexual violence in the Vietnam War, and the class nature of the military forces the U.S. fielded in the war.

Lair is somewhat critical of the author’s handling of the ‘decent interval’ theory, where, she argues, finding middle ground can mean splitting hairs or ignoring rottenness. Lair points to Daddis’s criticism of the thesis early in the book but his later seeming to concede its power. She cites examples and argues that Daddis’s distinction is one that makes no difference: “Even if Nixon and Kissinger did accept a decent interval only reluctantly (arguable), that they did so at all was still deeply cynical.”

Discussions of sexual assault come in for criticism for falling into the “middle ground” fallacy. Lair argues that Daddis made an admirable attempt to humanize the terror Vietnamese civilians endured. Then, she observes, *Withdrawal* qualifies that critique of U.S. conduct of the war, excusing the military command for never, as a matter of policy, condoning murder, rape, or torture. The reviewer argues the military *did* sanction such excesses indirectly, because these were a byproduct of its standard tactics; and because the U.S. command failed to investigate or meaningfully punish excesses and, in the case of My Lai, covered them up. Citing the #MeToo moment as demonstrating sexual violence to be still endemic to all facets of American life, Lair goes on, “Given the power differential between American military personnel and Vietnamese women, not to mention retrograde American opinions about gender and consent in the 1960s and 70s, I find it hard to believe that sexual violence was ‘perhaps not widespread’ in the Vietnam war.”

The Lair review is also critical of the author’s handling of the race and class aspect of the America reflected in U.S. field forces. Selective Service and the local draft boards, Daddis reports, did not exploit poverty or racial inequality. [While I hesitate to insert myself into this debate, I feel compelled to say that I spent two-and-a-half years as a volunteer draft counselor with the Columbia University Draft Counseling Collective and I am confident that eight out of ten of those we helped were poor or black, or both. In my view, Christian Appy’s contention in *Working Class War* is right on the money].⁵ The parsing of the treatment of the sexual, racial, and class issues are likely Lair’s strongest criticisms of *Withdrawal*.

Lair inserts the important perspective of the classroom. She explains how her students are befuddled when considering the war in the period of the Daddis study. Her students start with Lair presenting the image of the U.S. “Backing Out with Guns Blazing,” as from a saloon in a cowboy movie. But with intent comes the crunch. Those who believe in the war complain of leaving while still armed and able. Those who thought Vietnam a travesty want to know why the U.S. did not leave sooner, or even went into the saloon at all. Everyone is puzzled over how Tet changed everything, except everything was the same after Tet. Geoffrey Daddis’s book is the tonic.

Several reviewers engage the author’s analysis of the popularity of the neo-orthodox vision. Boylan argues that Daddis traces much of this to the fact the ‘better war’ myth absolves the U.S. military of all responsibility for the defeat. It could be—and was—used as a blueprint for future U.S. counterinsurgency operations, which the author deplors: “pundits in the mid-2000s were selling a theoretically war-winning strategy based on an

⁵ Christian Appy, *Working Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

overly simplistic, if not completely erroneous, reading of history” (Daddis, 204). According to Milam, Daddis finds veterans denouncing the media for misrepresenting military victories and pacification successes. Milam further observes that Daddis is critical of Vietnam veterans who, in the immediate aftermath of the war, took aim at civilian masters, “fuzzy-headed liberals” (Daddis, 15) and the pressures from Washington to turn tail. These things added to the attractions of neo-orthodoxy.

More critical to the war’s outcome than battlefield performance, as Daddis argues in the book, was bad grand strategy plus flawed ambitions. Lair ends by expressing comfort at the field circling back to an older interpretation—the United States backed out of Vietnam with guns blazing because the war could not be won. By contrast she finds Vietnam War neo-orthodoxy fundamentally disquieting: “How can such catastrophic loss be regarded as a victory? How are we to understand—let alone prevent—injustice, error, and tragedy if we cannot name them when we see them?”

Participants:

Gregory A. Daddis is an associate professor of history and director of Chapman University’s MA Program in War and Society. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He has authored four books, including *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 2017), and *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

John Prados is a senior fellow at the National Security Archive based in Washington, D.C. His current book is *The Ghosts of Langley: Into the CIA’s Heart of Darkness* (The New Press).

Kevin Boylan earned his doctorate at Temple University and has been employed in academe for over a decade, most recently as Instructor of History at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh. He also spent ten years working as a defense analyst for the U.S. Defense Department, Director of Program Analysis and Evaluation, and the U.S. Army Staff. He is the author of *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969-1971* (University Press of Kansas, 2016) and *Valley of Shadow: The Siege of Dien Bien Phu*, which will be published in 2018.

Meredith Lair is an associate professor of history at George Mason University and author of *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Ron Milam is an Associate Professor of Military History at Texas Tech University where he specializes in the Vietnam War. He is also the Interim Executive Director of the Institute for Peace and Conflict, which includes the world-renowned Vietnam Center & Archive. After a long career in the Oil & Gas Industry, he earned a Ph.D. at the University of Houston and is the author of *Not a Gentleman’s War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), and editor of two-volume *The Vietnam War in Popular Culture* (Praeger, 2017). As a Fulbright Scholar, he taught the History of U.S. Foreign Policy in Vietnam and teaches Study Abroad in Southeast Asia most summers. He is one of 8 American scholars writing the history of America’s wars for the new Education Center at “The Wall” in Washington D.C. and in 2015 was recognized for his teaching of military history by being inducted into the Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame at the Infantry Museum in Fort Benning, Georgia.

Robert J. Thompson holds a Ph.D. in U.S. History from the University of Southern Mississippi. *The New York Times* published “Pacification, Through the Barrel of a Gun” (10 March 2017), his contribution to its Vietnam ’67 series. He is presently revising his manuscript on pacification in Phu Yen Province during the American War in South Vietnam.

Review by Kevin M. Boylan, University of Wisconsin Oskosh

Gregory Daddis's *Withdrawal* mounts a powerful counterattack against revisionist historians who follow the lead of Lewis Sorley's *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*¹ by arguing that the United States won a military victory in Vietnam between 1968 and 1973, but threw it away due to a failure of political will in subsequent years. This 'better war' myth (as Daddis terms it) is rooted in the notion that U.S. conduct of the war in Vietnam changed dramatically during General Creighton Abrams's tenure as head of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) between 1968 and 1972. In a sharp departure from the body-counting strategy of attrition employed by his predecessor, General William C. Westmoreland, Abrams supposedly focused on 'clear-and-hold' operations designed to control and protect the population—including against the indiscriminate use of firepower that had characterized earlier U.S. 'search-and-destroy' operations. The victory Abrams won by 'pacifying' the countryside (and thus defeating the Vietcong insurgency) was cemented, the revisionists claim, by the parallel success of Vietnamization in creating South Vietnamese armed forces that could stand on their own against North Vietnamese aggression as long as they continued to receive generous financial and material support from the United States.

Daddis systematically debunks the 'better war' myth. First of all, building upon his earlier *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*², he concludes that no major shift in U.S. military strategy or tactics occurred under Abrams's leadership. Search-and-destroy operations were an integral part of his celebrated 'One War' strategy, body counts continued to be an important metric used to measure success, and violence remained the centerpiece of allied pacification efforts. Daddis also shows that "political grand strategy fashioned in Washington trumped military strategy conceived and implemented in South Vietnam" (10). Thus, President Richard Nixon, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger, and Defense Secretary Melvin Laird were the key players shaping U.S. conduct of the Vietnam War from January 1969 onward, not Abrams. And none of these policymakers aimed to win a military victory in Vietnam. The immediate goal was to dampen domestic antiwar sentiment by withdrawing U.S. troops (at a far more rapid pace than Abrams thought wise), while in the longer term they hoped to achieve a semblance of victory by negotiating a mutual withdrawal of North Vietnamese troops.

What really stands out, however, is Daddis's analysis of the disconnect between civilian policymakers in Washington and U.S. military commanders in Vietnam that caused relations between the White House and MACV headquarters to degenerate "to the point of dysfunctionality" (203) and almost resulted in Abrams's removal. While the general remained committed to achieving victory in Vietnam, the conflict had become "tangential to larger US national security needs" (9) as Nixon and Kissinger radically redesigned U.S. Cold War grand strategy to exploit the widening Sino-Soviet split. Since massive American military intervention in

¹ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999). Mark Moyar, author of *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey* (see publication details below), is the other standardbearer of the small, but highly influential 'better war' revisionist school, though it also includes a number of lesser lights such as Mark W. Woodruff, author of *Unheralded Victory: The Defeat of the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army, 1961-1973* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999).

² Gregory Daddis, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

Indochina had been rooted in the assumption that international Communism was monolithic, Nixon's 1972 opening to Mao's China raised fundamental questions about the war's necessity.

Condemned to command in a war that no longer really mattered either to his civilian superiors or most of the American people, Abrams could not and did not win it. According to Daddis, there was simply no way for him to blaze a trail to victory through the thicket of conflicting priorities arising from the simultaneous pursuit of Vietnamization, U.S. troop withdrawals, negotiations, and ongoing military operations. "At its core, then, *Withdrawal* argues that General Creighton Abrams, and the entire US mission in Vietnam, were unable to reverse, or even arrest, the downward trends of a complicated Vietnamese war that by 1968 had turned into a political-military stalemate" (9). This stalemate persisted, Daddis asserts, despite Nixon's efforts to pressure the Communists into making key concessions at the bargaining table by expanding the war into Cambodia and Laos, and a renewed strategic bombing campaign against North Vietnam itself. By late 1972, Nixon and Kissinger had ceased pursuing negotiated victory, and merely hoped to sustain the existing military stalemate long enough for a 'decent interval' to intervene between the signing of a 'peace' agreement and South Vietnam's inevitable collapse.

This did not prevent both the White House and MACV from claiming that the United States had achieved its objectives in Vietnam through the January 1973 Paris Peace Accords but "nowhere in these pronouncements of success did senior US officials use the word 'victory'" (197). And while Nixon and Kissinger tried retrospectively to put the gloss of victory on the agreement, Daddis is adamant that "The final Americans who withdrew from Vietnam did so not as victors, but as participants in a stalemated conflict. Abrams's 'one war' approach may have been necessary to maintain that military impasse, but it alone proved far from sufficient in erecting an integrated South Vietnamese political community, built on voluntary participation from the masses, capable of standing on its own" (209).

This highlights another key element in Daddis's critique of the 'better war' myth – namely that it focuses myopically on American actions and perspectives. Revisionist claims that an American military victory was overturned by a failure of American political will denies the Vietnamese any role in deciding their own destiny. Daddis argues that the military and political factors shaping events in Vietnam were so closely intertwined that it is impossible to separate them, and views the 'American War' as merely a particularly violent episode in a much longer Vietnamese civil war whose outcome was ultimately determined by the Vietnamese themselves. In the end, Vietnamese rather than American politics proved decisive, since despite the external trappings of nationhood, South Vietnam was an "imagined political community" (208) in which the bonds of loyalty linking citizens to the state were weak or nonexistent.

During the Abrams years, the allies dispensed with patient efforts to 'win hearts and minds' in favor of 'accelerated pacification,' which merely aimed to 'secure' the rural population. In *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam*³ revisionist historian Mark Moyar contends that this sufficed to bridge the gap between Saigon and its rural citizenry because apolitical villagers habitually 'blew with the wind' by aligning themselves with whichever side had the stronger local military presence. Daddis disputes that military force could have remedied the Saigon regime's political weakness, and finds that placing rural communities under military occupation did little to shift popular loyalties. He also observes that while

³ Mark Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: Counterinsurgency and Counterterrorism in Vietnam* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007).

Americans cite statistics as proof that nearly all of South Vietnam's population was 'secured,' they ignore the perspectives of villagers themselves who often felt anything but secure. Since Vietcong guerrillas, spies, and assassins continued to operate covertly in most of the 'secure' rural communities, the residents were constantly under threat from both sides. Gains in allied population control still depended, to a large extent, upon people fleeing insecure areas to escape liberally-applied allied firepower.

Daddis's analysis of the impact that American domestic politics had on strategy in Vietnam is remarkable for its even-handed treatment of the antiwar movement. Whereas the revisionists make the protestors scapegoats for defeat, he points out that the Nixon administration and the demonstrators actually had the same objective – negotiating an end to the war. Daddis concludes that domestic dissent did not dictate Nixon's strategic choices in Indochina, though he does credit it with obliging the president to "reduce the extent of carnage triggered by the American war machine" (141) in a conflict whose continuation was doing little to further American interests as defined by his new Cold War grand strategy. Daddis even rehabilitates the actress Jane Fonda by arguing that her notorious 1972 visit to North Vietnam did little to harm U.S. prisoners of war and that she spoke for many Americans by arguing that there was no need to continue fighting when a negotiated settlement could achieve the nation's truncated war aims. "Only after the conflict ended," Daddis writes, "when the 'better war' narrative took increasing hold, did she become the exemplar of wartime treachery and disloyalty" (109). This is a brave stance to take, since it could alienate readers who are not inclined to see 'Hanoi Jane' in a less critical light.

Daddis traces much of the 'better war' myth's popularity to the fact that it absolves the U.S. military of all responsibility for the Vietnam debacle. Veterans could claim that they had done their duty and won the war only to be stabbed in the back by longhaired peaceniks, biased journalists, *naïve* civilian strategists, and feckless politicians. Once the myth began gaining traction in the 1980s, other distasteful notions that the war had been unjust and unnecessary could also be challenged – most notably and successfully by President Ronald Reagan. What emerged was a more palatable narrative about Vietnam that yielded 'useful' lessons for the future instead of unpleasant ones about moral ambiguity and the limits of American power. "If the war had been fought bravely by gallant soldiers defending freedom abroad, then the United States could 'win' in future conflicts by not taking counsel of irresolute policymakers' fears" (201). In particular, the 'better war' myth seemed to provide a blueprint for future U.S. counterinsurgency operations – one that was closely followed by General David Petraeus during the Iraqi 'troop surge' of 2007-2008. Daddis laments this development, since "pundits in the mid-2000s were selling a theoretically war-winning strategy based on an overly-simplistic, if not completely erroneous, reading of history" (204).

Withdrawal is exhaustively-researched (with over 80 pages of dense footnotes), well-written, and convincing, but at times one wishes that it was just a little longer than its roughly 200 pages of text. For although the book is clearly aimed at a broader audience than Vietnam War specialists, there are places where covering topics in greater depth would make Daddis's arguments more convincing for readers who are not already familiar with the war's final years. For example, his critique of revisionist claims that the Paris Peace Accords were the capstone to a victory already won would be stronger if he mentioned that South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu denounced the agreement as a 'surrender document' and signed it only under duress after Nixon threatened to conclude a separate peace if he refused. Moreover, the revisionist thesis that Daddis is tackling has two key components – the 'better war' military victory allegedly achieved by Abrams and the subsequent political defeat supposedly caused by the U.S. Congress's allegedly decisive cutbacks in assistance to South Vietnam in 1974-1975. Thus, although the war's terminal phase (1973-1975) is, strictly speaking,

beyond the scope of a book that focuses on the final years of the ‘American War’ in Vietnam, optimally it should be covered at greater length.

Daddis’s persuasive critique of the ‘better war’ myth is an important contribution to Vietnam War historiography that promises to play a major role in the ongoing orthodox-revisionist debate. Daddis clearly has larger ambitions, however, since *Withdrawal* is also aimed at a wider audience that includes U.S. military officers and policymakers whom he believes have been seduced by a counterfactual narrative that teaches faulty lessons about Vietnam. We can only hope that he succeeds, and that future U.S. strategy and combat operations will be based upon a truer grasp of what Vietnam revealed about the limits of American power, and the impossibility of divorcing the military and political spheres from each other either at home or abroad.

Review by Meredith H. Lair, George Mason University

When I drafted my first syllabus on the Vietnam War nearly twenty years ago, I struggled to come up with a pithy title for a lecture on the war's final phase. So I borrowed one: "Backing Out with Guns Blazing," an Old West analogy invoked in February 1971 by a State Department official asked to reconcile President Nixon's policy of withdrawal with the U.S./South Vietnamese incursion into Laos.¹ I still use it, because the scene it evokes so appropriately captures the heady mixture of violence, regret, and bravado that characterized the Nixon years in Vietnam. Each semester, I faithfully unpack the metaphor, situating the United States as a beleaguered gunslinger in an Old West saloon who realizes he is in a fight he cannot win. I explain café doors, I pantomime the action, I deploy sound effects: "blam blam blam." My students laugh and seem to understand: it is time for the U.S. to leave Vietnam. But what comes next in the narrative often befuddles them, in part because it still befuddles me. Hawkish students want to know why the gunslinger left if there was still fight in him. Dovish students want to know why the gunslinger did not leave earlier (or why he even went to the saloon in the first place). And we all end up marveling that everything about the war had changed after Tet, yet nothing was different. How could that be?

In *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam*, Gregory Daddis provides some clarity—not the moral clarity of revisionists like Lewis Sorley, who sought to fashion affirming noble-cause narratives out of the war's ambiguities, but rather the uncomfortable historical clarity that comes with acknowledging the limits of American power. At its core, *Withdrawal* is a reassessment of Sorley's reassessment of Creighton Abrams, who succeeded William Westmoreland as head of Military Assistance Command—Vietnam (MACV) in the wake of the Tet Offensive. Daddis interrogates Sorley's 1999 *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*,² but also Abrams' 'better war' strategy and what Daddis calls "the 'better war' narrative" in a study that combines history, historiography, and memory. *Withdrawal* is a wonderful and wonderfully usable book that knits together discussions of major engagements (Tet, Operation Apache Snow, the Cambodian and Laotian incursions, and the Easter Offensive), war crimes (My Lai but also Speedy Express), pacification, the antiwar movement, POWs, the collapse of American and South Vietnamese morale, and the interplay between grand strategy and applied strategy that offer lay readers a sophisticated yet accessible narrative of the war's later years. The book is organized thematically but also chronologically, making it appropriate for undergraduates who lack previous knowledge of the Vietnam War, while its invocations of myth and Vietnam War revisionism will make productive use of graduate students' time.

Withdrawal begins with the Tet Offensive, which "exposed...the complexities of a multifaceted war in Vietnam" (24). Tet generated a new and pervasive pessimism among the American public and U.S. forces in Vietnam that demanded answers—and hope. Abrams was supposed to be "a new general with a better strategy" who would, so the U.S. news media claimed, turn the tide of the war (37). Daddis points out that much of the Abrams narrative was manufactured by American journalists, a contention that simultaneously undermines a major pillar of the 'better war' narrative and exposes the great and convenient lie of the

¹ "The latest official explanation of the President's Indochina policy is that "he is backing out of the saloon with both guns firing...." Quoted in James Reston, "Backing Out of the Saloon," *New York Times*, 21 February 1971, E11.

² Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harcourt, 1999).

oppositional media thesis (43). The oppositional media thesis claims that journalists ‘turned’ the American public against the war by reporting unsavory facets like casualties, war crimes, and the war’s poor likelihood of success. With Abrams scaled down from savior to flawed but competent general, Daddis examines the strategy he implemented and the reasons it failed. “At its core, then,” Daddis writes, “*Withdrawal* argues that Creighton Abrams, and the entire U.S. mission in South Vietnam, were unable to reverse, or even arrest, the downward trends of a complicated Vietnamese war that by 1968 had turned into a political-military stalemate” (9).

In a crystalline introduction, Daddis expounds on three themes that animate the entire book. First, “political grand strategy fashioned in Washington trumped military strategy conceived and implemented in South Vietnam” (10). Friction defined Abrams’s relationship with the Nixon White House, especially in the war’s final year. President Richard Nixon’s objectives as president only sometimes overlapped with Abrams’s objectives leading MACV, creating a disconnect in multiple facets of the war. For example, Vietnamization—the process of turning the war over to the South Vietnamese—was a strategy for U.S. withdrawal, not a strategy for U.S. (or even South Vietnamese) success (73). Victory in the Vietnam War meant something much narrower and more conservative than in American wars past—not sweeping ideas like union, freedom, or self-determination, but rather the parochial negative objective of maintaining an independent, non-communist South Vietnam. For Nixon, whose political survival depended on putting an end to American casualties, Vietnamization *was* the objective, not a means to victory. Later, as Nixon sought a diplomatic resolution to the war that would enable him to pursue détente with China and the Soviet Union, grand strategy undermined Abrams’s quest for outright military victory. From diplomatic and political perspectives, the ‘better war’ was a finished war. As a result, U.S. military operations increasingly supported negotiations by strengthening the U.S. bargaining position. Efforts to undermine the National Liberation Front (NLF), beef up the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN), or eliminate North Vietnamese sanctuaries in Cambodia and Laos did not serve the cause of American victory; they served the cause of American withdrawal.

Withdrawal’s second theme recognizes the war’s complexities that have long vexed my students; “Abrams could not balance a war that was unfolding along numerous (and often competing) lines” (10). Some facets of the war represented the continuity and even escalation of hostilities: the continuation of search-and-destroy, mass roundups and targeted assassinations of suspected South Vietnamese insurgents, incursions into Cambodia and Laos, the bombing of Cambodia, and the mining of Haiphong Harbor. Other facets of the war in this period demonstrated a faltering U.S. commitment: mass troop withdrawals, vigorous negotiations with both North and South Vietnam, and increasing reliance on air power to keep American casualties and commitments at a minimum. Setting aside Nixon’s grand strategy ambition to move beyond Vietnam in pursuit of broader Cold War objectives, which conflicted directly with pursuit of a military victory in Vietnam, Abrams had internal contradictions to manage. His ‘One War’ strategy emphasized the use of overwhelming firepower in order to save American lives. The resulting indiscriminate violence alienated rural South Vietnamese people, who turned their support towards the NLF and/or North Vietnamese regulars in their midst, or who at least withheld their support from the Saigon government. Even increased U.S. attention towards pacification meant prioritizing security first, before population control and long before socioeconomic development. As a result, impoverished Vietnamese people focused on discrete individual and family needs rather than on shared national objectives, a direct inversion of the politics of sacrifice North Vietnam and the NLF had mobilized among their supporters.

Withdrawal’s third theme foregrounds “the interrelationships between war and society in both the United States and South Vietnam” (11). Throughout the book, Daddis makes good use of recent scholarship on

North and South Vietnam to offer Vietnamese perspectives and lend agency to Vietnamese people.³ *Withdrawal* also delves into the antiwar movement and the war's internal culture in "A Beleaguered Army at a Long War's End," a chapter dedicated to morale issues on the home front and in South Vietnam. This chapter's final section, "A Long War Goes On," examines South Vietnamese morale, an unusual and productive inclusion. Ultimately, Daddis finds, "soldiers in both armies simply could not relate their daily activity to any strategic purpose" (161). Some mention of the material aspects of the morale problem—that American material abundance was but a poor substitute for a cause worth fighting for, that it deepened divisions between American service members, and that it exacerbated Vietnamese antipathy for the U.S. presence—would have rounded out this discussion.

Daddis' inclusion of Vietnamese voices is historiographically on point, given the recent internationalization of Vietnam War scholarship, but it also speaks to the empathetic approach he takes to his subjects, which he has described in other contexts.⁴ Throughout *Withdrawal*, Daddis carefully parses the import and implications of several critical details: the 'madman theory' (whether Nixon's reliance on bombing was rational or reckless), the 'decent interval' (whether the Nixon White House cynically pursued a negotiated settlement that would create the appearance that the United States was not responsible for South Vietnam's collapse), the performance of the ARVN (criticism of its internal corruption but also granular perspectives on the difficulty of service therein), and the attitudes of American servicemen towards the Vietnamese (conflation of "political ambivalence with simple war weariness") (94). Employing measured language and an even tone, Daddis seeks to find a middle ground between extremes of indictment and endorsement. It is one of the best things about the book.

And, at times, it is also one of the most troubling. Sometimes finding middle ground can mean splitting hairs or ignoring the rottenness of some positions. Take, for example, the 'decent interval' thesis. Daddis is critical of the thesis early in the book, characterizing it as "slightly overblown," but later he seems to concede its power. First Daddis tells us that Nixon and Secretary of State Henry/National Security Advisor Kissinger did not "willingly embrace" the decent interval as a solution to the problem of declining support (domestic and international) if the United States was perceived to have abandoned South Vietnam, but they eventually came to accept it (58). Later, in a discussion of negotiations in the summer of 1971, Daddis finds that "talk of a 'decent interval' was less a statement of policy than an admission of American limitations" (180-181). This seems like a distinction without a difference. Even if Nixon and Kissinger did accept a decent interval only reluctantly (arguable), that they did so at all was still deeply cynical. The Nixon administration repeatedly offered South Vietnamese officials assurances of continued American support, and it promised American

³ See, for example, Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013); Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); David Hunt, *Vietnam's Southern Revolution: From Peasant Insurrection to Total War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2008); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013); Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Andrew Wiest, ed., *Rolling Thunder in a Gentle Land: The Vietnam War Revisited* (Oxford and Long Island City: Osprey Publishing, 2006).

⁴ Gregory Daddis, "What Not to Learn from Vietnam," *New York Times*, 29 September 2017.

parents a conclusion to the war that would give historical and national meaning to their sons' deaths. It matters that these were lies.

Daddis takes a similarly measured approach to *Withdrawal's* discussion of sexual assault, which he situates in a passage dedicated to the effects of indiscriminate violence on South Vietnamese civilians and, by extension, on the successes and failures of American pacification. Correctly, Daddis points out the “racialization of the population proved especially frightening for Vietnamese women,” drawing from the work of Heather Stur and Nick Turse in an admirable attempt to humanize and make historically legible the terror Vietnamese civilians endured at the hands of their American liberators.⁵ Daddis qualifies the implicit critique of U.S. conduct of the war by stating that “MACV never condoned the murder, rape, or torture of civilians as a matter of deliberate policy” (95). This is technically true, but it is also true that military authorities at all levels of command *did* condone the murder, rape, and torture of civilians *indirectly*, by failing to investigate or meaningfully punish such acts and, in the case of My Lai, by deliberately covering them up. Further, Daddis writes, “Sexual violence, while perhaps not widespread, came to be seen as unexceptional by indifferent soldiers.” He then quotes one of those indifferent soldiers, from Eric Bergerud’s *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning*, who claimed there “were a few rapes’ but nothing ‘out of the ordinary’” (95-96).⁶ Given *Withdrawal's* emphasis on restoring Vietnamese agency, it is an odd choice to rely on an American man to assess both the prevalence of sexual violence in the Vietnam War and its normality. As the #metoo movement has recently demonstrated, sexual harassment and violence are endemic to all facets of American life, in the United States, in the twenty-first century. Given the power differential between American military personnel and Vietnamese women, not to mention retrograde American opinions about gender and consent in the 1960s and ‘70s, I find it hard to believe that sexual violence was “perhaps not widespread” in the Vietnam War. It is admittedly difficult to write historically about rape, but if access to sources is the operative variable, then that should be stated in the text. I suspect a deep dive into American personal narratives of the Vietnam War, armed with a contemporary understanding of power and consent, would likely reveal the war’s sexual violence in all its disturbing frequency.

Daddis’ handling of the war’s class dimensions is similarly problematic, as he suggests that the Selective Service deferment system and the local nature of draft boards (all white, all male, usually local elites) did not exploit poverty and racial inequality. First, in explaining the appeal of demonstration culture, Daddis writes, “It seemed not to matter that working-class families, whose attitudes the media dutifully covered, found the counterculture repulsive, unpatriotic, and fraying the bonds of national unity” (142). I read this paragraph several times, and I cannot escape the sense that Daddis is subtly conflating “working-class families” with white, working-class families. Daddis cites Penny Lewis’ *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks*, but seems unconvinced by her argument that the antiwar movement was, at its core, a working-class movement

⁵ Heather Marie Stur, *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam Era* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Nick Turse, *Kill Everything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Picador, 2013).

⁶ Eric Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (New York: Westview Press, 1993).

composed of poor and lower-middle class white people and people of color who were overrepresented in the ranks of America's poor.⁷

Further, Daddis seems to reject Christian Appy's central contention, in *Working-Class War*, that the war itself exploited the poverty of the nation's most vulnerable citizens.⁸ Daddis writes, "While official conscription policies hardly intended to create division based on class, perceptions of discrimination beleaguered local draft boards" (145-146). It is true that official conscription policies did not specifically stipulate that they were designed to exploit and intensify class divisions, but they did nonetheless value the lives of citizens unequally. Daddis overlooks the myriad ways that conscription policies and veterans benefits represented deliberate attempts at social engineering. For example, the draft's deferment system, developed after WWII, was designed to pare down the pool of eligible men by granting exception to those with lives the state deemed productive, such as men headed to college or workers in skilled trades. By the same token, Project 100,000—an effort to provide remedial assistance to hundreds of thousands of men deemed previously draft ineligible—was justified not as a gross attempt to pack the Army with cannon fodder, but rather as a progressive attempt to extend the economic and educational benefits of military service to the poor and uneducated. As Margot Canaday points out in *The Straight State*, even the original GI Bill itself represented a legislative "closet" that incentivized gay people to remain in hiding lest they exit the military with "bad paper."⁹ Daddis also litigates the question of the war's working-class nature through a questionable piece of scholarship, an essay in *Operations Research* that found "little association between income and per capita death rates," a bold assertion Daddis invokes twice—once in the text and again in the notes (146, 271, n. 54).¹⁰ Daddis rightly points out in a note that author James Fallows rebutted the *Operations Research* essay, but he does not convey the degree to which Fallows savaged the legitimacy of the research. Fallows himself provides the middle ground, which is to point out that no one claims that the poorest of the poor (the lowest decile) served disproportionately in Vietnam. What is claimed, widely, in first-hand accounts and research, is that the war took the lives of a disproportionate share of the lowest second and third deciles. At the same time, of the nearly 30,000 men who graduated from Harvard, Princeton, and Yale during the war years, only 20 of them died in Vietnam.¹¹ Yes, there was the "widespread impression of favoritism," as Daddis carefully parses the issue (146). But there was favoritism, too.

There is a lot of ugliness in the Vietnam War, and for the most part *Withdrawal* does not shy away from it. At the same time, Daddis skillfully avoids cartoonish renderings of Nixon, Kissinger, and Abrams, but also of

⁷ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁸ Christian G. Appy, *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

⁹ Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Arnold Barnett, Timothy Stanley, and Michael Shore, "America's Vietnam Casualties: Victims of a Class War?" *Operations Research* 40:5 (September-October 1992): 856-866.

¹¹ James Fallows, "Low-Class Conclusions," *The Atlantic* (April 1993), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1993/04/low-class-conclusions/305404/>.

ARVN officers and American antiwar demonstrators. The complexity of these portrayals and Daddis's appreciation of his subjects' humanity are commendable. In contesting Lewis Sorley's rehabilitation of Abrams and Vietnamization, Daddis' empathetic commitment to understanding social and cultural forces enables him to arrive at a larger, more disturbing conclusion. In the final analysis, Daddis writes, "the controversial ending to the American War thus has far less to do with Abrams's strategy or congressional funding or domestic opposition"—all the usual suspects—"than with South Vietnam's inability to develop a peacetime national identity in a time of war" (208). Overall, despite revisionist historians' attempts to parse distinctions between American commanders and phases of U.S. strategy, "Westmoreland had bequeathed to Abrams a war that proved stubbornly resistant to American influence" (43). Vietnamese scholars reached similar conclusions about the limits of American power long ago, and those arguments formed the crux of Vietnam War orthodoxy for decades. The United States backed out of Vietnam with guns blazing because the war could not be won, at least not at acceptable cost. There is something comforting about circling back around to an older interpretation, albeit one with greater clarity and new shades of nuance, because Vietnam War revisionism is so fundamentally disquieting. How can such catastrophic loss be regarded as a victory? How are we to understand—let alone prevent—injustice, error, and tragedy if we cannot name them when we see them?

Review by Ron Milam, Texas Tech University

“You know, it’s too bad. Abrams is very good. He deserves a better war.”¹ So wrote *New Yorker* correspondent Robert Shaplen in 1969, several months after General Creighton Abrams had assumed command of Military Assistance Command Vietnam (COMUSMACV) from General William Westmoreland. After America’s defeat in 1975 and for the next 25 years, scholars, veterans and the general public wondered how this could have happened. Perhaps America lost its opportunity to ‘win’ when it changed leaders in 1968. Thus Shaplen’s words were resurrected and the ‘Better War’ term became emblematic of what many believe could have been a ‘winning’ scenario in America’s War in Vietnam. While the extent to which the term was used prior to the publication of Lewis Sorley’s book *A Better War* is somewhat unknown, these three words have now become all that is needed to describe what many Vietnam veterans, historians, and the general public have adopted as a phrase that is understood to mean that America did not have to lose the Vietnam War, that American soldiers sailors, airmen and marines were asked to fight the war with ‘one hand tied behind their back,’ that it was the media and politicians in Washington that caused America to lose, and that America’s loss has become the rallying cry for the way to not conduct warfare in the future.

But if one examines Shaplen’s brief phrase closely, there is nothing there that indicates any noticeable change in leadership under General Abrams, only that he “deserved” a better war because he was “very good.” In *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam*, Gregory Daddis challenges any evidence that there was any change in America’s conduct of the war after Abrams assumed command. He adds that “this work further argues that the ‘better war’ thesis overextends reality. The myth’s narrative assumes that military strategy crafted in Saigon could overcome political decisions made in Washington. It could not. Even with over a half-million U.S. troops in Vietnam by 1968, continued fighting there seemed unlikely to attain larger foreign policy objectives” (9). From Daddis’ perspective, it would not have made any difference whom newly elected President Nixon had appointed to lead America’s war effort, because the decision had been made to withdraw from Vietnam, to leave the fighting to the Armed Forces of Vietnam (ARVN), and to ‘Vietnamize’ the war.

Daddis has written the book that needed to be written about the end of the American War in Vietnam, but this is not a book that is comfortable for Americans to read. He argues that the war was never America’s to win or lose, that only the Vietnamese could do that – whether they were North Vietnamese, South Vietnamese, or South Vietnamese fighting for the Communist North. This idea is not palatable to most Americans, and particularly to Vietnam veterans, their families, and to many South Vietnamese who fled their nation after 1975.

For purposes of full disclosure, this author served under General Abrams’s command in Pleiku Province in 1970-1971. In the opening pages of *Withdrawal*, Daddis references his experiences in Operation Iraqi Freedom as a command historian for the Multinational Corps and his being surprised that the only book on the commander’s professional reading list that dealt with Vietnam was Lewis Sorley’s *A Better War*. This author’s experiences as both a veteran and historian is that veteran historians look at all wars through a lens that requires much more scrutiny and less romanticism than non-veterans. Daddis was bothered by the

¹ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999) ix.

notion that the only book recommended by commanders on Vietnam was a book that makes the case that America could have won the war if only it had let the very good commander make both tactical and grand strategic decisions. This, of course, was at a time when General David Petraeus had taken over from General George Casey, and America was entering the post-surge period. Daddis sees striking similarities in these parallel periodizations of the two wars.

Daddis is critical of the attitude that developed in the immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War, particularly by Vietnam veterans who “took aim at their civilian masters after South Vietnam’s collapse. They railed against the ‘fuzzy-headed liberals’ and the great deal of pressure from Washington...just to turn tail and run” (15). And he claims that the veteran community also denounced the media for turning America against the war by misrepresenting military victories and the positive actions of soldiers conducting pacification operations. In today’s terms, they were criticizing so-called ‘fake news.’ Notwithstanding the very broad brush that Daddis uses in pronouncing the Vietnam veteran community as the one that was most critical of how the war – and its warriors – was perceived, his views on memory and how decision makers have tried to use the Vietnam legacy to develop policy are quite profound: “It seems beneficial then to consider the Abrams years not as a ‘better war,’ but rather as a case study in the limits of U.S. power abroad” (206). This realistic view of how armies can only do so much in exerting political power—Clausewitzian perhaps—is a plea to not use the results of defeat incorrectly. According to Daddis, changing commanders without changing grand strategy will never work in any war situation, and attempting to do so will always result in failure. His own experiences in Operation Iraqi Freedom are the lens through which he views war.

A word about Daddis’s resources: this 209-page book contains eighty-two pages of notes and approximately 962 individual citations. Most remarkable, however, is that most citations not only reference where the quote or idea came from, but also additional historiography that might contain an opposite view from the one being cited. For historians looking for sources on almost any Vietnam War topic, this is highly useful.

Withdrawal is a masterful book, the third volume in the Daddis trilogy of *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War*, which dealt with the flawed metrics for determining victory, and *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*,² which took a new look at General Westmoreland’s leadership. There is more to his work than just attacks on work by revisionist scholars such as Lewis Sorley, in that Daddis uses sound archival evidence to dispel any thoughts that the military could have achieved victory in the face of flawed grand strategy.

Daddis also avoids falling into the trap that has snared many authors on the issue of the orthodox view that Vietnam veterans were not mistreated upon their return from Vietnam, such as Jerry Lembcke’s *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam*.³ Daddis writes, “surely some veterans met with hostility upon returning home. One, for instance, felt ‘all I got from around me was that Vietnam veterans were drug addicts, murderers, freaked out criminals.’ By and large, however, most Americans looked to move beyond

² Gregory A. Daddis, *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Daddis, *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

³ Jerry Lembcke, *The Spitting Image: Myth, Memory and the Legacy of Vietnam*, (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

the whole unpleasant experience” (200). This author prefers to accept the words of one of the earliest of the orthodox Vietnam War historians, Marilyn Young, who wrote: “It doesn’t matter how often this happened or whether it happened at all. Veterans felt spat upon, stigmatized, contaminated.”⁴

Daddis has also avoided laying too much blame on the ARVN, to whose forces Americans served as allies – not the other way around. If the war was theirs to win or lose but America had ‘Americanized’ it only to leave on its own terms, how is the ARVN to blame solely for the defeat? Again, the flawed American grand strategy of being there with flawed ambitions was more critical to the outcome than performance on the battlefield.

Dr. Daddis, Colonel (ret.) has done a great service to Vietnam War scholarship with his trilogy, and *Withdrawal* is a fitting ending to his previous work. These volumes might not make Americans proud, might not make Vietnam veterans comfortable, but he has not in any way disparaged the service of those who did what their respective countries asked them to do, whether they be citizens of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the Republic of Vietnam, or the United States of America.

⁴ Marilyn Young, *The Vietnam Wars* 1945-1990, (New York: harper Collins, 1991), 320.

Review by Robert J. Thompson, Independent Scholar

At last, the *coup de grâce* to the ‘better war’ myth has arrived in the form of Gregory A. Daddis’s *Withdrawal: Reassessing America’s Final Years in Vietnam*. As part of his Vietnam War strategy trilogy, in *Withdrawal* Daddis marks the historiography’s move away from the Orthodox versus Revisionist debate to the Post-Revisionist era. He achieves this by demonstrating that undeniable continuity existed between the wars waged by General William Westmoreland and General Creighton Abrams.¹ In examining the decision-making processes, Daddis demonstrates that Abrams conducted a war in a manner that was near-identical to that of his predecessor. Abrams, too, faced stipulations beyond his control from the White House.

Daddis argues that the war after the 1968 Tet Offensive suffered from the same issues that hampered U.S. diplomatic and military officials in South Vietnam in years prior. Yet the author goes further as he posits a narrative of a war that spiraled out of the control of those commanding it—with only the Nixon Administration capable of enacting an end. *Withdrawal* is the zenith of what orthodox historians have long-worked towards, following the evidence to systematically disprove Lewis Sorley’s ‘better war’ thesis. Sorley’s *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam* (1999), approached the Vietnam War with an agenda of fashioning the Abrams-era into a period during which the United States reversed course and came close to victory in South Vietnam. Indeed, if only the Americans had stayed just a bit longer, the U.S. would have emerged victorious. A book with evidence tailored to validate a war that never existed, *A Better War* nonetheless generated discourse and challenged scholars of the war to prove Sorley wrong. Orthodox scholars have targeted Sorley’s caricature of Westmoreland and his strategy, yet while some were effective in putting holes in *A Better War*, no single publication sunk it until now.

Underpinning Daddis’s arguments are archival records from key Vietnam War collections, including communications between the American authorities directing the war. For those reasons, *Withdrawal* functions as the demarcation between the preceding historiography and future manuscripts. Daddis topples the pillars of the ‘better war’ narrative, misconceptions of pacification included. Pacification lay at the heart of the Vietnam War and that of the broader Cold War period. Focusing on pacification is crucial, as the concept most clearly and undeniably links every year of the war, thereby revealing continuity, not dramatic change, as the theme of the war in South Vietnam. Despite its significance, pacification never benefited from a catholic interpretation—both before, during, and after the American War. Indeed, French counterinsurgency expert David Galula wrote extensively on pacification, but, as noted by Daddis, never defined the term.² With such context, Daddis prepares readers for his chapter on pacification as a means of seeing the continuity of the war. He discusses the term, emphasizing the centrality of pacification to American strategy, and the absence of agreement over what exactly the concept entailed. Both Westmoreland and Abrams understood and appreciated pacification, a point relayed by Daddis. Similar to change in Military Assistance Command, Vietnam leadership after the 1968 Tet Offensive, so too did Civil Operations and Revolution Development Support (CORDS) experience new, yet familiar guidance. Adding to the continuity theme, Daddis writes that

¹ Gregory A. Daddis’s previous two works on the Vietnam War include: *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

² David Galula’s works include *Pacification in Algeria, 1956-1958* (Santa Monica: RAND Corporation, 1963) and *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1964).

both Robert Komer and William E. Colby—each of whom ran CORDS at one time or another—emphasized “upgrading territorial security, stepping up attacks on the [National Liberation Front] political infrastructure, developing strong local government, and expanding self-defense” (89).

The central figure in the revisionist mythos, Abrams, fought a war similar to that of Westmoreland, and he did so with the same pressure from Washington. Indeed, “little had materially changed from Westmoreland’s days,” Daddis contends, citing the continued emphasis on security—always the fleeting subject of those tasked with achieving it—in the Pacification and Development Plans from 1968 to 1970 (101). If Abrams was the hero general the American War deserved, such a reality escaped Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Richard Nixon. Daddis argues that the war under Abram’s guidance came under intense scrutiny by the White House. Both the disastrous outcome of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam’s invasion of Laos in Operation Lam Son 719 and for what Nixon perceived as a less than “vigorous” by response to Hanoi’s 1972 Easter Offensive, raised questions concerning Abram’s ability to lead. Fallout from the disastrous Laos incursion nearly cost Abrams his job, as “Lam Son 719 shattered Nixon and Kissinger’s faith in Creighton Abrams” (174). If a ‘better war’ existed, it did so only in the revisionism of future American governments and in the minds of those trying to validate their role in a lost war.

Daddis’s closing remarks serve a fitting end to his work. He reminds readers that the American period of the war, typically labeled as the Vietnam War, is what the Vietnamese consider the American War—a single phase in a conflict bookended by internal Vietnamese struggles. With such intensity placed on the study of this one American phase, context is fleeting. As Daddis notes, although Americans successfully conjured the myth of a looming, yet missed chance at victory in South Vietnam, the South Vietnamese themselves never witnessed it, as their own government struggled mightily to achieve legitimacy in the eyes of those living in the countryside. Scholars should heed Daddis’s words: “America’s final years in Vietnam remain a contested battlefield, a landscape of residue minefields from the past, because of the war’s long reach. But we can only profit from its study when we set aside long-held tropes about savior generals who swoop in after calamity, rescue a losing war thanks to a new and better strategy, only to have their triumphs forsaken by civilians back home” (209). What he leaves readers with is a call for better scholarship, for the end of the winning versus losing dichotomy that has engulfed the literature. Such a challenge should resonate with historians, especially those looking to expand, rather than rehash, the collective understanding of the American period of the war.

Author's Response by Gregory A. Daddis, Chapman University

First off, I want to extend my sincere thanks to Tom Maddux for deeming my work worthy of consideration for an H-Diplo roundtable. Second, and just as importantly, I am grateful to the historians assembled in this roundtable who took the time to read and so thoughtfully critique *Withdrawal*. It is deeply humbling to have your scholarship taken seriously by an esteemed group of professionals whose research and writing you admire. And, without question, I greatly respect, and have profited from, the work of these four reviewers.

This past semester, I taught a graduate seminar on war, myth, and memory as part of our Masters Program in War and Society Studies at Chapman University. While I previously had read quite a bit of literature on the construction of popular narratives and collective memory, I never before had taught a graduate-level course focused solely on war and memory. The experience exposed to me (and hopefully my students), in full measure, how history and memory are not one in the same, and, far too often, how they can be at direct odds with one another.

Certainly, the historiography of the American war in Vietnam illustrates this reality for any discerning reader. Since the fall of Saigon in 1975, if not before, Americans have been debating fundamental questions about how the war ended. As Gary Hess perceptively notes, “at the heart of the 50 years’ debate has been the issue of explaining failure.”¹

What I intended to demonstrate in *Withdrawal* rests on what should be a simple conclusion: that the United States ultimately failed to achieve its political objectives in Vietnam. Yet even this question—were Americans victorious in Vietnam?—has the capacity to generate heated discussion. Uncomfortable memories and countervailing myths no doubt help explain why the history itself is such a contested battleground. And so too does the counterfactual approach of revisionist historians who discern a path to American victory ‘if only’ certain historical actors had made better decisions.

As Kevin Boylan rightly notes, such ‘if only’ arguments establish the foundation of the ‘better war’ thesis. These advocates contend, unpersuasively in my view, that if the superior U.S. general Creighton Abrams had succeeded William Westmoreland earlier in the war, military victory could have been achieved before political support for the war crumbled back in the United States. Boylan’s own recent provincial study of Binh Dinh province during the Abrams years undercuts such fanciful notions. He argues convincingly that the “twin objectives of pacification and Vietnamization were at odds with each other.”² I could not agree more. Pacification, the prolonged endeavor to link the rural population to the Saigon government, proved far from peaceful. And Vietnamization never solved the riddle of translating tactical military successes into voluntary popular support for the Saigon regime.

¹ Gary R. Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America’s Lost War*, 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell, 2015), ix.

² Kevin M. Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969-1971* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016), 264.

These truths often get sublimated in American-centric stories that leave little room for Vietnamese voices. From a historiographical standpoint, there is still much more to be done in terms of hearing from and evaluating these voices. While Edward Miller and Jessica Chapman, for instance, have offered a far more nuanced view of the Ngo Dinh Diem years by relying on Vietnamese sources, we still await similar scholarship on the Nguyen Van Thieu regime. The Abrams- Nixon story remains incomplete, in part, because of this lacuna.³

Ron Milam's review suggests one possibility for why so many Americans have been little interested in listening to Vietnamese voices. Counterfactuals, if artfully employed, suggested a way to ensure that the tragic missteps of Vietnam were not replicated in future wars. Thus, the 'lessons' coming out of the conflict tended to focus on American problems—civilian policymakers who constrained uniformed leaders from applying the full weight of U.S. military power; a craven media that undermined domestic support for the war; or a misguided general (Westmoreland) who was left in charge of the war long after it was clear that he was not winning it.

This approach to history, to me at least, borders on purposeful myth-making. By concentrating almost exclusively on the American experience, revisionist historians and some veterans conceptualize a past wherein victory indeed was possible, even plausible. The lessons were clear. Fix the mistakes. Win the next war.

Milam, himself a veteran, offers a crucial warning in his review. Historians of the wars in Vietnam, myself included, need to be careful in how we portray the 'veteran community.' As one senior American officer in Vietnam recalled, this was a 'mosaic' war wherein the character and nature changed over time and by location.⁴ The point is that few veteran experiences, either American or Vietnamese, were identical. Having written a fine monograph on junior officers serving in the conflict, Milam knows this better than most.⁵ The challenge in depicting such a complex war is in interpreting its history without generalizing, and thus oversimplifying, the stories of those who fought in it.

Thus, there is merit in provincial studies like the one that Robert Thompson recently completed at the University of Southern Mississippi.⁶ They highlight the numerous, often conflicting, undercurrents of an intensely complicated political-military struggle. Archival sources leave little doubt that Westmoreland and Abrams appreciated the complexity of the war they were asked to fight. Both understood that the U.S. marines operating in the northern provinces of South Vietnam were waging a far different war than those 9th Infantry Division army soldiers stationed in the southern region of the Mekong Delta. And, relying on the 'mosaic' paradigm, both realized the war's character was changing over time. Thus, I might suggest that

³ Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013). Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).

⁴ Phillip B. Davidson, *Secrets of the Vietnam War* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1990), 20.

⁵ Ron Milam, *Not a Gentleman's War: An Inside View of Junior Officers in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

⁶ Robert J. Thompson, "More Sieve Than Shield: The U.S. Army and CORDS in the Pacification of Phu Yen Province, Republic of Vietnam, 1965-1972," (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 2016).

Thompson's characterization of Abrams fighting in "near-identical" fashion to Westmoreland slightly overstates my argument. Without question, the two generals' strategic concepts were characterized by far more continuity than change. Yet Abrams oversaw a war that had been altered significantly by the 1968 Tet offensive and even more so by President Richard M. Nixon's 1969 decision to initiate the withdrawal of U.S. troops from South Vietnam.

Finally, Meredith Lair's perceptive review (one I wish I had the benefit of reading before submitting the final manuscript) further underscores why the post-Tet period of Vietnam War history requires such care. There seem to be as many historiographical controversies on the Nixon years as there are for the Lyndon B. Johnson presidency—the supposed 'madman' theory, the 'decent interval' debate, or whether Nixon had achieved 'peace with honor,' to name but a few.

Lair's gunslinger analogy is fitting and, no doubt, social critic Tom Engelhardt would agree. Indeed, like Lair, he concludes that the "western genre, however imaginatively inverted, was incapable of making sense of Vietnam."⁷ The withdrawal years arguably remain contested history because Americans still want their armed hero to defeat his black-hatted enemy before riding into the sunset. Yet even John Wayne, in the concluding scene of *The Green Berets*, watches the sun set incorrectly in the east. Reconciling the myths of the Vietnam War never quite fits with the reality.

And, as Lair rightly indicates, resolving the competing interpretations of the Nixon years in Vietnam is an enormous challenge. (One might wonder if it is even possible.) If I stuck too firmly to a middle ground in the debates over the 'decent interval,' for example, it largely is because I still am conflicted over a number of nagging questions. Was Secretary of State Henry Kissinger correct in arguing that the U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam should be a matter of policy rather than retreat or collapse? Would a more immediate departure from South Vietnam after Nixon's election truly have damaged U.S. credibility overseas and undercut the President's desire to refashion global Cold War relationships? Or, was a selfish, if not devious, administration, caring little for the long-term viability of the Saigon regime, responsible for sentencing thousands upon thousands of Vietnamese and Americans to death by committing to four more years of costly war?

If Nixon and Kissinger indeed were cynical in the pledges they made to Saigon, I tried not to be as I sifted through the primary sources and opposing viewpoints. Perhaps this led to my hesitation to act as historian-judge, though Lair makes an important, and increasingly relevant, point for today's political climate. The lies that senior civilian policymakers make in a time of war matter.

So too do the sources historians use when evaluating the impact of soldier violence against civilian populations. Lair's critique of my discussion on sexual assault is exactly right. While I am convinced that purposeful violence against the population was never part of any top-level command guidance, it is impossible to refute the argument that the American approach in South Vietnam was tremendously destructive. And, in

⁷ Tom Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2007), 237. Lair complicates this narrative even further in her own excellent work, noting how the memory of the war came to rest on the flawed "assumption that service in Vietnam equaled service in combat." *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 61.

terms of sexual assault, personally devastating. Of course, it is difficult to obtain reliable figures on rape in war, for the reasons Lair properly identifies. But relying too heavily on American sources to determine the spread and frequency of wartime sexual violence leaves one questioning how the soldier quoted by Eric Bergerud defined “ordinary” when it came to rape.⁸

Finally, Lair’s evaluation of my handling of the antiwar movement and the draft’s racial and class components also has merit. Here, language matters. I agree with Penny Lewis’s contention that the myth of the antiwar movement improperly pits upper-class elites—that “effete corps of impudent snobs” in Vice President Spiro Agnew’s 1969 caustic construction—against the far more patriotic working-class families.⁹ The antiwar movement was never so neatly divided. This is why I personally find the story of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW) so compelling. And, in terms of the draft, if I did conflate “working-class families” with white, working-class families, it frankly is because of imprecise language. In *Westmoreland’s War*, I covered the racial and class inequities inherent in the Project 100,000 program and how those inequities were papered over with socially progressive language. In reading Lair’s commentary, I realize that I should have been more accurate in *Withdrawal* and more explicit in arguing that favoritism and discrimination in conscription policies was not just a matter of perception, but a fact of life for far too many young Americans.

Again, I am humbled by the generally positive remarks within these reviews. Having been immersed in the study of the American war in Vietnam for so long, I am particularly interested in why certain myths endure and how those myths are unsubstantiated in a careful reading of archival sources. Without question, Americans, then and now, want to believe that war can be better. That it can deliver, both militarily and politically. That it can solve most any foreign policy problem. That it can serve as a transformative force for less ‘developed’ societies abroad.

Such claims may be so, but the withdrawal years of the American war in Vietnam do not offer any historical evidence supporting these aspirations. And if our collective aim is to learn from the past to ensure a better future, we all would profit from shattering the allure of ‘better war’ myths.

⁸ Eric Bergerud, *Red Thunder, Tropic Lightning: The World of a Combat Division in Vietnam* (New York: Westview Press, 1993).

⁹ Penny Lewis, *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013).