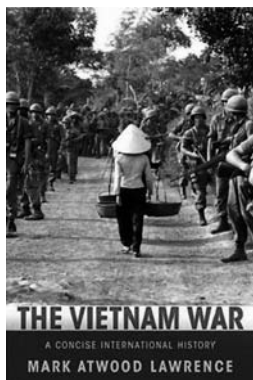


THE VIETNAM WAR *A Concise International History*

BY MARK ATWOOD LAWRENCE

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Reviewed by Shelton Woods



Winston Churchill once told an audience that he intended to give a long speech because he did not have time to prepare a short one. It takes skill to condense a massive subject into a concise, entertaining, and accessible book. But this is what Mark Atwood Lawrence accomplishes in his 224 page book *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*. Comprised of eight brief chapters, Lawrence takes the reader through

a fast-paced, well-organized overview of the Việt Nam War.

In his introduction, Lawrence states his objective: “The goal of this book then, is to strike a balance by examining the American role within a broadly international context.”(4) Along the way, the author attempts to answer four questions: What were the Vietnamese motives for fighting the US? Why did the world’s mightiest countries focus on Việt nam? Why did the war turn out the way it did? What are the legacies of the Việt nam War? Lawrence effectively answers some of these questions in his book.

Each chapter in the book begins with a highly readable summary of the subjects covered in that chapter. Lawrence masterfully provides an overview of Việt Nam’s history in the first chapter. Whether the reader is new to this history or an avid student of the war, the first section of the book proves profitable for its succinct, yet surprisingly in-depth summation of Việt Nam from its pre-history to the post-World War II French colonial war. This is followed by the second chapter, “Colonialism and Cold War.” Just as effective as the first chapter, Lawrence clearly explains how the French public came to see this Southeast Asia conflict as the *la sale guerre*—the dirty war. This chapter is most helpful in fulfilling the author’s goal of contextualizing the war within the international community.

Chapters three through seven focus on America’s involvement in Việt Nam. While this makes up the bulk of the book, and focuses more on a shorter time-period, Lawrence is not as sharp in placing the war in a global context. Nonetheless, in these chapters he untangles the seemingly insane actions and policies of North Việt Nam, South Việt Nam, and the US.

In chapter five, “War on Many Fronts,” Lawrence demonstrates how LBJ did not understand the limits of US military power. The author

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quotes LBJ as stating, “I’m going up old Ho Chi Minh’s leg an inch at a time.” (91) At approximately the same time, Le Duan, the first Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party noted, “The North will not count the cost.” (91) Continuing this theme of misunderstanding, Lawrence provides solid proof that American presidents, defense secretaries, and foreign secretaries could not comprehend the North Vietnamese resiliency. Lawrence quotes LBJ’s description of Việt Nam as that “damn little pissant country” (99); President Nixon was even more graphic, calling North Việt Nam, that “little shit-ass country.” (154)

While Lawrence provides relatively little insight into the politics of North and South Việt Nam, he effectively paints the tragic dilemma that both North and South Vietnamese peasants faced during the conflict. In the North, the absolute confidence of the political leaders was rooted in the coming of age of so many young men who would walk down the Ho Chi Minh trail to fight the Americans and the Army of the Republic of Việt Nam (ARVN). But many of these Vietminh soldiers were less than enthusiastic in making this journey. The saying

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among these poor northern peasant soldiers was: “Born in the North to die in the South.” (133) Of even greater sorrow were the South Vietnamese farmers who were caught in a no-win situation. Lawrence provides telling statistics regarding the opinion of South Vietnamese peasants—and how the opinions vacillated, based on the amount of daily (and nightly) protection the US and ARVN could guarantee.

Lawrence, like other writers on the war, gives an inordinate amount of attention to the 1968 Tet Offensive. Chapter six, entitled “The Tet Offensive,” focuses on this one event. To be sure, the Tet Offensive was a major event during the war; however, dedicating an entire chapter in this brief book to the event misses the opportunity to focus on more lasting and weighty issues, such as South Việt Nam’s economic shift and urbanization during the 1960s. And, while Lawrence does spend some time on the role of Cambodia and the Khmer Rouge during the war, much more space might be given to both Cambodia’s and Laos’ role in the war, given that one of the goals of this book is to provide international context.

In chapter seven, “Ending the American War,” Lawrence covers the Nixon/Kissinger war era. The confusing nature of the peace negotiations are clearly delineated in the chapter; but this is one of the times in the book where every sentence needs to be read carefully, as the many actors and events can confuse the reader. There is also a bit of editorializing as the author describes Nixon as “exhausted and often alcohol-fogged.” (147)

In the volume’s final chapter, “Wars Unending” Lawrence explains that although the war ended in the 1970s, in many ways it is still with us. Việt Nam continues to struggle economically, and its politicians seek to remain true to the ideologies for which so many died. As for the US, a “Việt Nam syndrome” remains that colors policies and public perception of all subsequent wars.

This book should be used for students above the eighth grade. When compared to more substantial books on the subject, and they are legion, Lawrence provides an engaging and sufficient overview for teachers and students to understand the complexities of the Việt Nam War. In short, this book might be even more attractive than the larger volumes on the subject because it is succinct and focuses on the primary issues of the war. One might call this book a substantial preview—and if the students wish to learn more—they can turn to more detailed studies on the subject. ■

SHELTON WOODS was born in the Philippines and spent his first eighteen years there. He received his PhD in Southeast Asian History from UCLA in 1993. He is currently Professor of History and Associate Dean at Boise State University. He is the author of four books and numerous articles.