

Gettleman, Marvin E., Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, eds. Vietnam and America: A Documented History . New York: Grove, 1995.

James J. Wirtz

Volume 16, numéro 1, spring 1996

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs16_01br06

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Wirtz, J. J. (1996). Compte rendu de [Gettleman, Marvin E., Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, eds. Vietnam and America: A Documented History . New York: Grove, 1995.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 16(1), 177–178.

Gettleman, Marvin E., Jane Franklin, Marilyn B. Young, and H. Bruce Franklin, eds. *Vietnam and America: A Documented History* . New York: Grove, 1995.

In this newly revised and expanded version of a well-known reader on the Vietnam period, Marvin Gettleman and his colleagues provide more than just a documentary record of some key Vietnam decisions. Reading *Vietnam and America* is like opening a time capsule: found inside are living examples of 1960s activists against the war. For the anti-war movement, this volume could very easily serve as the historical indictment of the American role in Indochina.

The argument documented by Gettleman, et al. lays the blame for the Vietnam debacle completely at America's doorstep, specifically in a series of decisions to prolong or impede the Viet Minh effort to free their country from colonialism. Beginning with the American decision to acquiesce in French post-war efforts to reinstate colonial control over Indochina, the US took a series of actions that brought on the holocaust: the division of Vietnam following the 1954 Geneva accords; violation of the free-election provisions of the Geneva accords; aid to the illegitimate Diem regime; harassment of North Vietnam (the Gulf of Tonkin incident); intervention in the ground war and the "unlimited" air war against North Vietnam. What Gettleman and his colleagues seem to suggest is that Hanoi's victory in Vietnam was inevitable; American intervention, motivated by blind anti-communism and a disdain for the down trodden masses of the developing world, amounted to nothing more than gratuitous violence. In the end, the massive infusion of American resources could only delay the victory of liberation forces over imperialism and the puppet regime in Saigon.

After reading this volume one notices a Vietnam paradox: in hindsight, the conflict appears both unavoidable and unnecessary. Ho Chi Minh and his band of freedom fighters were dedicated and sophisticated communists, adept at play ing both Moscow and Beijing for all they were worth. Simultaneously, rank and file members of the National Liberation Front (NLF) seemed to be motivated by nationalist ambitions; they just used Marxist-Leninist jargon to communicate their anti-colonial message to Western audiences. Americans might have cut a deal with the nationalists in the NLF, but once Hanoi became a Soviet client, the "liberation" of South Vietnam was destined to become a focal point of the superpower standoff. Hanoi's failure to prevent Vietnam from becoming the Cold War's greatest battleground was a strategic mistake of enormous consequence. Vietnam has not yet recovered from the effort to achieve the "Great Spring Victory" of 1975.

This rather subtle analysis is beyond the scope of the excerpts of secondary sources found in *Vietnam and America*. When they wrote in the 1960s and early 1970s, the authors cited were interested in demonstrating American perfidy. Not even Rousseau would argue with the reason hunger one contributor provides to explain why the Viet Minh started the August 1945 revolution. (p. 17) By contrast, other contributors "find it particularly difficult to accept" that a 1964 American bombing raid against a leper colony was an "accident." (p. 464) Descriptions offered of the North Vietnamese Army's (NVA) "swift

and peaceful" occupation of the old imperial capital of Hue appear particularly ominous in hindsight:

At dawn, the new masters of the city went through the streets in groups of ten. In each group, there was a leader who spoke to the people through the bullhorn The other members of the team ... knocked on doors and passed out pamphlets and leaflets. Joking and laughing, the soldiers walk in the streets and gardens without showing any fear It didn't seem that these residents were being coerced in any way. (p. 367)

Several thousand residents, including all civil leaders loyal to the Saigon regime, disappeared during the NVA occupation of Hue. Several hundred victims had been buried alive by the NVA. Gettleman and his colleagues, however, never bothered to mention why NVA coercion in Hue was an issue during the Tet offensive.

Vietnam and America clearly illustrates that anti-war activists of the 1960s felt betrayed by the United States. When individuals armed with only naive beliefs in the infallibility and benevolence of US intentions and actions confronted the horrors of Vietnam, they did not interpret the American experience in Vietnam as simply the darker side of bureaucracy, the Cold War, technology or the modern age. Instead, America came to personify evil, while the "liberation forces" came to represent what America once stood for, i.e., all that was good in the world.

For those coming of age in the aftermath of Vietnam, this dichotomous view of conflict and global politics seems naive and hopelessly simplistic. Cynicism and a loss of faith in democratic institutions are a legacy of the war. But, for many who came of age during the conflict, the Vietnam war remains a polemical issue, definitely an inappropriate subject for historical or analytical reassessment. As one of the editors concludes: "For the past twenty years many of us have been struggling to keep the memory of those images [of US atrocities] fresh and vivid, so as to combat one and another revisionist version of the Vietnam war." (p. 521) In sum, *Vietnam and America* is probably best viewed as a document from the Vietnam war and not a history of the conflict.

James J. Wirtz

US Naval Postgraduate School