

America and the Vietnam War

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Review Essay

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Andradé, Dale. *Trial By Fire. The 1972 Easter Offensive, America's Last Vietnam Battle.* New York: Hippocrene Books, 1995.

Hunt, Richard A. *Pacification. The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds.* Boulder, CO, San Francisco, CA and Oxford, UK: Westview, 1995.

These two recent additions to Vietnam War history show both the continuing limitations and the maturation of the field. Andradé, the editor of the periodical, *Vietnam*, and the author of the well-received *Ashes to Ashes: The Phoenix Program and the Vietnam War*, (1990) provides a major contribution to the battle narratives of the latter half of the American phase of the war. The actions of America's southern allies have never received their due attention. Andradé's commendable account illustrates that there is much to be written about the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. The ARVN served as America's principal ally and co-combatant throughout nearly twenty years of peace and war. The United States had been building up the ARVN under the policy of Vietnamization in an effort to withdraw gracefully from a war that the American polity had largely determined was unwinnable. However, the 1972 Easter Offensive launched by conventional North Vietnamese forces nearly engulfed the entire northern I and II corps areas. The offensive tested and largely overran South Vietnamese forces. The northern forces failed to achieve their physical/tactical objectives in the South, because the capture and holding of the South's major cities eluded them. The North's attack and the South's counteroffensive, bolstered by overwhelming US air power and ground advisors, are the primary subjects addressed by Andradé. It was a near-run thing. The United States displayed its unwillingness to intervene massively on the ground in support of its ally. The offensive did result in the US government resuming a massive bombing campaign against the North, which culminated in Operation Linebacker II. The air offensive apparently brought the North into fruitful negotiations which led to the final peace agreement between Hanoi and Washington. Andradé does not reexamine either the aerial campaigns or the peace negotiations. His focus is the ground war. Despite that limited focus, all US allies could learn from the ARVN's experiences and the dilemmas present in American expectations.

Richard Hunt's work on pacification brings one to similar considerations. The land campaign was only part of the South's strategy of fighting and negotiating. Hunt, an official historian at the US Army's Center for Military History has labored for some time over the official history of the US supported pacification program. The Army's reluctance to have a detailed critical account has led to the project being reduced from two volumes to one. Hunt's book appears to be the official account. Those familiar with the sorry tale of pacification will find little startling new material here, but will find great detail concerning US Army participation. Reluctantly, the Army accepted the types of missions

and responsibilities that a national hearts and minds/counterinsurgency war entailed for them. But for that matter, neither the State Department nor White House came to grips with these issues until late in the war. Pacification remained a misfit. Various branches of the US government vied for elements of the program. The South Vietnamese government remained jealous of its prerogatives as the sovereign government responsible for internal security, countersubversion, rural development and constitutional change. Hunt's work adds appreciably to our knowledge of the Army's acceptance and cooperation with the wider pacification program. His conclusions regarding the pacification and nation -building efforts are pessimistic. Notwithstanding the US Army's reluctance to participate, most of the efforts were unsound or unsuitable. Despite its real successes in the latter half of the war, Hunt is chary of offering an up -beat conclusion regarding the merits of pacification. Douglas Macarthur once remarked that much military history could be summed up in two words, "too late." The gains in pacification came too late for the American polity to continue supporting the war effort. Too late, came clear appreciation of the strategic postures of non-intervention or fighting a highly defensive protracted war. The latter option was one commonly proposed by advocates of the counterinsurgency school, which favored a stance in which US forces bolstered but did not supplant the South Vietnamese forces. Hunt finds the final gains in pacification greatly outweighed by the demerits of America's ally and the determination of the northern and southern foes. What would have been a more fruitful strategy for the United States remains a subject for contemplation. That is why the Vietnam War remains so frustrating to deal with but necessary to study. Both accounts reviewed here are new touchstones in that effort.

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