

Why Were We in Vietnam?

A historian and former participants from both sides re-examine the traumatic Southeast Asian conflict.

ARGUMENT WITHOUT END

In Search of Answers to the Vietnam Tragedy.
By Robert S. McNamara,
James G. Blight and
Robert K. Brigham
with Thomas J. Biersteker
and Herbert Y. Schandler.
Illustrated. 479 pp. New York:
Public Affairs. \$27.50.

CHOOSING WAR

The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam.
By Fredrik Logevall.
529 pp. Berkeley:
University of California Press. \$35.

By Jack F. Matlock Jr.

LIKE other traumatic events affecting society as a whole, the war in Vietnam will doubtless provoke, in the words the Dutch historian Pieter Geyl applied to history itself, an "argument without end." Nevertheless, the book of that name by Robert McNamara and associates and a very different one by the diplomatic historian Fredrik Logevall should narrow the range of reasonable discussion.

The two books cover many of the same issues, but differ greatly in perspective and approach. "Argument Without End" is based on conversations between Americans and Vietnamese who were active in their respective countries when the war started. The "lessons" and "corrections to the historical record" drawn from these conversations are those of people who had the perceptions and were intimately involved in the decisions they now brand as mistaken.

"Choosing War" is by a scholar who was born in Sweden the year John F. Kennedy and Ngo Dinh Diem were assassinated, and who was too young to be involved in the impassioned debates of the 1960's and 70's. A member of the first generation to come to maturity after the war in Vietnam ended, Logevall, who teaches at the University of California, Santa Barbara, can treat the events he describes as history, not as searing personal experience. His account of the diplomatic context in which President Lyndon B. Johnson decided to send American troops to fight in Vietnam is thorough and nuanced, and expressed with admirable clarity. Rarely is diplomatic history so well written these days. One who lived through the period as an attentive adult will, however, detect at times a failure to understand fully the spirit of the age.

Despite their many differences,

Jack F. Matlock Jr., a former United States Ambassador to the Soviet Union, is a professor at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., and the author of "Autopsy on an Empire."

these books agree on one fundamental issue. Both argue that the decision to "Americanize" the war in Vietnam, taken in what Logevall calls "The Long 1964" (mid-1963 to early 1965), was an error as clearly avoidable as it was tragic. Certainly it was an error, and its results were tragic. Whether it was as easily avoidable as these authors believe is not as clear.

The most riveting part of "Argument Without End" contains the transcripts of discussions by American and Vietnamese participants in a series of conferences. The Americans are to be commended for using the meetings to test the accuracy of their previous views rather than defending them. The Vietnamese generally maintained that they were right all along, though some spoke with greater candor as the sessions progressed. In their attempt to be objective, the Americans sometimes went farther than they should have in accepting self-serving comments from their interlocutors. But this was by no means invariably the case.

Col. Herbert Y. Schandler raised a key question in the following exchange: "Do you think the war might have ended more favorably to the Americans if we had brought in a lot more combat troops, and maybe attempted to take the

land war north of the 17th parallel?"

Col. Quach Hai Luong, a former military officer who since the war has studied United States strategy, responded: "No. In that case, I believe you would have lost the war sooner."

"You do? Why?"

"Because you would have done exactly what the French had done years before. You would have spread yourselves out widely and put yourselves in an unfavorable position."

THE Vietnamese also denied that more intensive bombing would have made a difference, pointing out that the country was 80 percent rural and that it would have been impossible for the United States to find targets that would cripple the relatively primitive military machine in North Vietnam.

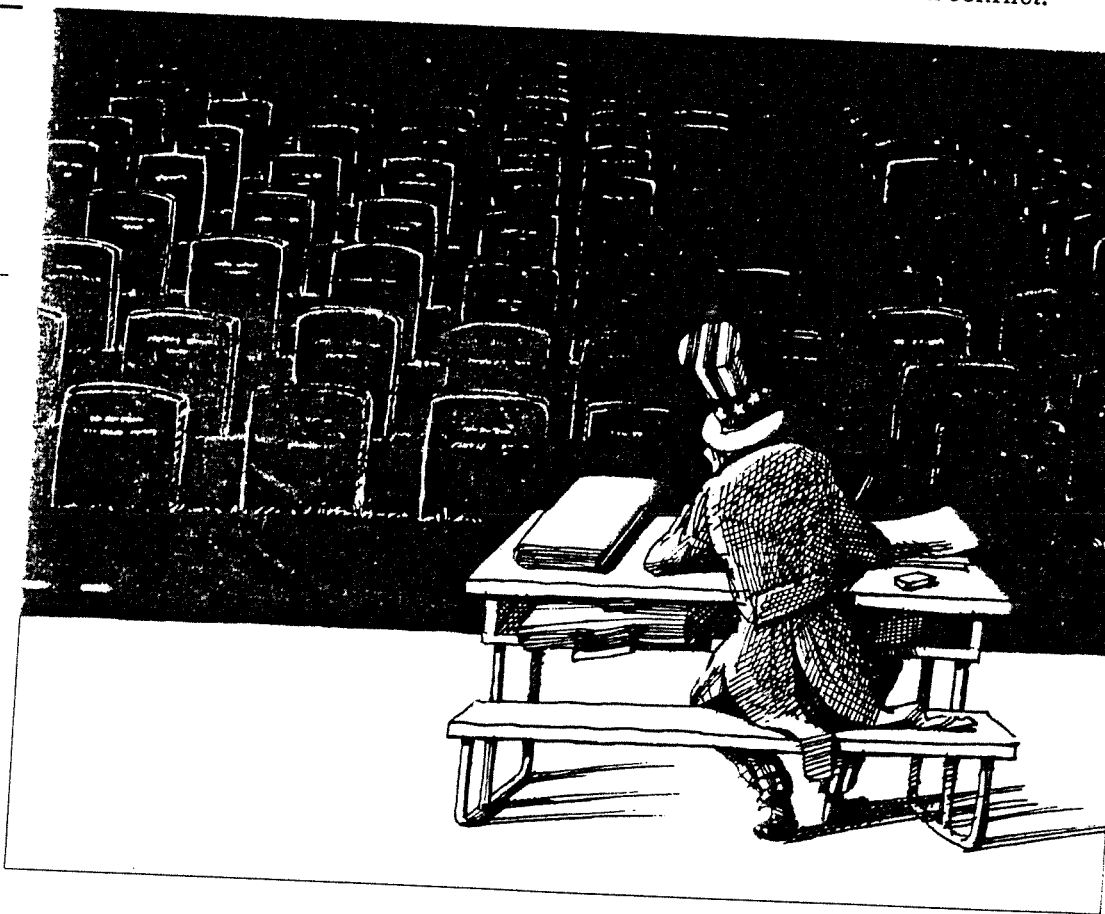
On this issue, the Vietnamese were persuasive. They were less so when the Americans asked whether North Vietnam would have respected a neutral South Vietnam if one could have been created in the 1960's. Some dodged the question, but others explained that while Hanoi intended eventually to unify the country under its rule, the process could have been gradual, lasting 10 to 20 years. This led McNamara to conclude

that such an agreement would have satisfied both Washington's and Hanoi's goals. Logevall also argues that neutralization of the South was possible before the United States entered the war in force, and adds that a settlement would have brought an earlier and more robust détente between the United States and the Soviet Union.

Of course, it is easy to believe that North Vietnam would have accepted a coalition government in the South as a temporary measure to avoid large-scale American intervention. Looking back, we can understand that any political solution would have been preferable to what actually happened. In that sense, the United States did miss an opportunity to avoid a war that had tragic consequences for all.

That "opportunity," however, was probably not what the authors of either book have in mind, nor would its likely consequences have been as benign as they imagine. The reason is that Hanoi would not have respected a neutral government in Saigon for long, but would have done its best to subvert it. Its unshakable goal was to control the entire country. Opposition in the South to its rule would have prevented the patient approach postulated by McNamara's

Continued on next page



When a book is... provocative



New York Times Bestseller

"Moore writes about sex with depth and intelligence, blending mythological material with a caring, personal style.... [He] understands that sex is juicy, radiant, wildly uncontrollable; and full of paradox."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

compelling

New York Times Bestseller
A New York Times Notable Book

When Hitler's war ended in 1945, the war over Hitler—who he really was, what gave birth to his unique evil—had just begun.

"Brilliant.... Restlessly probing and deeply intelligent." —*Time*

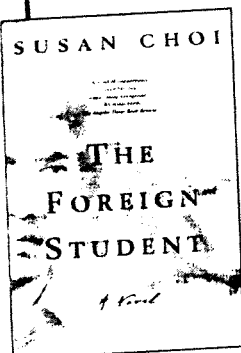
Reading Group Guide available



gripping

"An auspicious debut novel... epic in its harrowing accounts of war and intimate in its charged descriptions of the unlikely love affair at its center."

—*The New Yorker*

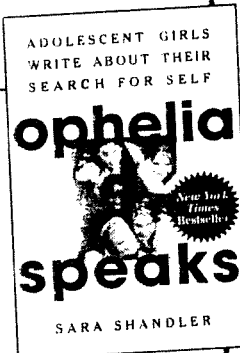


illuminating

New York Times Bestseller

"There's not one false note in the brave adolescent voices we find in *Ophelia Speaks*. These girls honor, enrich and inform us by speaking the plain truth about their experience."

—Harriet Lerner, author of *The Dance of Anger*



It's a Perennial.

HarperPerennial

A Division of HarperCollinsPublishers

Reading Group Guides are available at your local

Why Were We in Vietnam?

Continued from preceding page

Vietnamese interlocutors, and its tactics would have been brutal. The Kennedy and Johnson Administrations had good reason to consider proposals for a coalition government merely a cover for an eventual North Vietnamese takeover.

Washington decision makers were wrong to think of Ho Chi Minh as a puppet of Moscow or Beijing, but they were not wrong about the danger of Communist aggression. Furthermore, they were right to be concerned about the fate of those Vietnamese in the South who opposed a Communist takeover, many of whom had fled from the North to escape it. We cannot know with certainty what would have happened to them if the United States had delivered them to Hanoi under the fiction of a neutralized government, but there was reason to expect the worst. After all, Communism in the Soviet Union had killed more Soviet citizens than even Hitler did. Mao began his murderous Cultural Revolution not on Moscow's orders but to achieve his own purposes.

PROTECTION of the non-Communist South Vietnamese, while important, was probably not the decisive motivation of American officials who decided in favor of war. For an explanation of their choice, we need to recall the American political scene at the time. It was just a few years after the war in Korea, McCarthyism and a bruising debate over who lost China. The most damaging tag that could be placed on any political candidate, particularly a Democrat, was "soft on Communism." John Kennedy recognized this with his charges of a missile gap during his Presidential campaign, his endorsement of the Bay of Pigs invasion, his response to Soviet missiles in Cuba and his rhetoric, especially in his speech in West Berlin.

Let us suppose that, on the Kennedy-Johnson watch, Hanoi had managed to take over South Vietnam as the result of an agreement with the United States. Other dominoes would have started to wobble, not in consequence of some master plan in the Kremlin vaults, but because Moscow, Beijing, Havana and Hanoi would be competing for influence over insurgencies elsewhere, and attempting to create them where they did not yet exist. (Witness Soviet backing for the Cuban adventures in Latin America and Africa in the 1970's: Moscow did not control Fidel Castro, but this did not prevent cooperation to support rebellions in many countries.)

Whether or not further dominoes had fallen, the 1968 election in the United States would have been filled with charges of softness on Communism, and perhaps even treason. Richard Nixon (or, conceivably, Barry Goldwater) would probably have been elected, not with a promise that he had a secret plan to end the war in Vietnam, but with pledges of a renewed anti-Communist crusade. To think that the rapprochement with China or arms control agreements with the Soviet Union would have been possible under such conditions, as Logevall does, is an exercise in fantasy.

Logevall makes the valid point that American allies in Europe did not clamor for United States intervention in Vietnam. Even if they did at times give lukewarm support in response to American pressure, they had grave doubts about the probable outcome. Nevertheless, this does not mean Washington had no reason to fear that abandonment of South Vietnam would erode the credibility of the United States as an ally in Europe. It would have, and Moscow would have had an easier time driving wedges in the NATO alliance if that had happened.

Though one may question some of the judgments in both books, McNamara and his associates offer several valuable lessons growing out of their experience and their discussions. Every one of these admonitions is important, and as events since the Vietnam War suggest, ignoring any of them can lead to policy failure.

The lessons for American policy makers that they list are: (1) understand the mind-set of your adversary; (2) communicate with your adversary at a high level; (3) in foreign policy, practice the democratic principles you preach (by bringing the public and Congress into the decision-making process); (4) apply power only in a context of multilateral decision making (aside from territorial self-defense of the United States); (5) acknowledge that some problems in international affairs have no solution, particularly no military solution; and (6) organize to apply and administer military power with intensity and thoroughness.

Few observers would quarrel with these maxims, all of which should be given greater weight by American Governments than is customary. When they are observed, the odds improve that a policy will succeed. President Ronald Reagan's concerted attempt to grasp the mind-set of the Soviet leaders and his insistence on maintaining a high-level dialogue facilitated not only the settlements he eventually achieved, but also a change in the Soviet outlook he confronted at the outset of his Presidency.

President George Bush's patient work to attract public and Congressional support, his diplomacy to build an international coalition and secure United Nations authority, and his decision to apply intense military force from the outset of hostilities were essential prerequisites to his victory in the gulf war. While that war did not end all the problems in the region, Bush was able to distinguish those issues amenable to a military solution (repelling the invasion of another country) from those that are less likely to be solved by military means (removing a foreign leader, arbitrating a civil war).

Examples of failures when these lessons are ignored are legion. The Carter Administration misunderstood the Soviet mind-set and failed to deter the invasion of Afghanistan. The Reagan Administration misunderstood the Libyan leader Muammar el-Qaddafi's thinking and avoided direct communication, with the result that limited military actions provoked rather than deterred terrorist acts.

THOUGH the jury has not yet convened, historians may judge that President Clinton's bombing of Yugoslavia exacerbated rather than prevented a tragedy in Kosovo. A more accurate understanding of Slobodan Milosevic's point of view — along with diplomatic efforts to obtain United Nations authority for any action taken, and a recognition that some problems cannot be solved by military means — might well have produced a more successful and less controversial strategy.

The specific lessons and conclusions set forth in "Argument Without End" are well reasoned and highly relevant to decisions being made today. Those in "Choosing War," largely confined to the circumstances at the time and thus more remote from decisions today, are less convincing. Both books, however, are major contributions to a better understanding of the Vietnam War and its implications: Logevall's for his portrayal of the international context, and McNamara's for the dialogues and his reflections on them.