



The Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam, 1968–1975 by Martin G. Clemis.

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The English-language scholarship on the Vietnam War, especially on why the communists won the war and the United States and the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) did not, has seen three major developments in the last twenty years. First, historians have examined specifically Vietnamese archival and published primary sources to clarify the perspectives of both the Saigon¹ and Hanoi regimes.² Second, scholars have stressed the international aspects of the conflict, using European, Southeast Asian, Chinese, and other sources.³ A third development has been a focus on the US role in the war, using American sources to mount a revisionist challenge⁴ to orthodox histories of the war. This has, in turn, prompted resistance by both postrevisionist historians and proponents of the early postwar narrative of the conflict.⁵ Notably, Gregory Daddis has challenged the revisionists' negative assessment (shared by most orthodox historians) of Gen. William Westmoreland's strategy.⁶ Conversely, he criticizes the positive assessment of Gen. Creighton Abrams,

1. On Ngo Dinh Diem and his government's relationship with the United States, see Geoffrey C. Stewart, *Vietnam's Lost Revolution: Ngô Đình Diệm's Failure to Build an Independent Nation, 1955–1963* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2017); Jessica M. Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell U Pr, 2013); Edward Miller, *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2013); and Philip E. Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: U Pr of Kansas, 2003).

2. See Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2013); Pierre Asselin, *A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, and the Making of the Paris Agreement* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2002); and Tuong Vu, *Vietnam's Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2016).

3. E.g., Mark Atwood Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden: Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: U Calif Pr, 2005); Kathryn C. Statler, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 2007); Qiang Chai, *China and the Vietnam War, 1950–1975* (Chapel Hill: U North Carolina Pr, 2015); Nicholas Khoo, *Collateral Damage: Sino-Soviet Rivalry and the Termination of the Sino-Vietnamese Alliance* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2011); and Ang Cheng Guan, *Southeast Asia and the Vietnam War* (NY: Routledge, 2010).

4. See Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2006); Lewis Sorley, *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011) and *A Better War? The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Viet Nam* (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1999). See also Max Boot, *The Road Not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (NY: Liveright, 2018).

5. On the orthodox-revisionist debate, see Andrew Wiest and Michael Doidge, eds., *Triumph Revisited: Historians Battle for the Vietnam War* (NY: Routledge, 2010), and Gary Hess, *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War* (Malden: Wiley, 2008).

6. Gregory Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2017), *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* (id., 2014), and *No Sure Victory: Measuring U.S. Army Effectiveness and Progress in the Vietnam War* (id., 2011). See also Andrew J. Birtle, *U.S. Army Counterinsurgency and Contingency Operations Doctrine, 1942–1976* (Washington: Ctr of Military History, US Army, 2006) 223–476.

whom revisionists have praised for leading a “better war” after the Tet Offensive.⁷

Historian Martin Clemis (Valley Forge Military College) characterizes *The Control War* as fitting “comfortably within a growing trend in the field that can be considered postrevisionist” (26). He is also concerned with post-Tet warfare, especially its “operational environment,” which he defines as “a composite of the conditions, circumstances, and influence that shape the conflict area ... [that] included the deployment of friendly and enemy military forces; the country’s social, political, and economic character; and its physical environment” (8).

The significance of geography and terrain is often dismissed or marginalized when discussing Vietnam and other revolutionary conflict aside from their utility in assisting guerrillas at the tactical level. In fact, the belief that insurgents fight to influence the population, not to hold or occupy territory, is widespread. Such an assertion, however, is incomplete; it does not provide a full or accurate picture of communist revolutionary warfare, particularly its means and ends. Although the practical realities of asymmetrical conflict dictated that communist guerrillas at times abandon territory and use stealth, speed, and mobility as means to preserve themselves in the face of a numerically and technologically superior enemy, territory ... was extremely important. (9)

Put another way, the author considers the “hearts-and-minds” argument favored by revisionist historians to be inadequate in explaining post-Tet developments. Before the Tet Offensive, and especially after, the National Liberation Front, the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV), and the US-RVN allies fought to control and hold territory. Clemis believes this experience defined the war from the Tet Offensive to the signing of the Paris Peace Accords and the subsequent phase of “incessant low- to mid-intensity ‘land grabbing’ and ‘nibbling’ operations” (22) by both communist and Saigon forces. The political strategies adopted by both sides to win the “hearts and minds” of the peasantry were merely one part of a much broader picture. Like other postrevisionist works, *The Control War* disputes revisionist claims about the likelihood of victory, but also highlights the complexities of the reality on the ground.

Clemis divides the bulk of the book into halves: the first is thematic; the second chronological. In the first, he analyzes the communist theoretical foundation of revolutionary warfare as well as the US and the RVN strategy of pacification and counterinsurgency. On the one hand, the Vietnamese communists adapted the Maoist strategy of guerrilla fighting and protracted the conflict for their own ends. On the other hand, their opponents wanted to foster social change, responsible citizenship, and strong local government, especially at the hamlet level. These opposing efforts were often complicated by a host of factors. For example, many RVN-controlled hamlets abutted other hamlets controlled by communist insurgents. As a result, both sides resorted to measures like travel restrictions to ensure the loyalty of populations within their boundaries.

The desire for territorial control overrode political goals and prompted the use of force and repression far more often than either side had envisioned. At the local level, these tactics mixed “individualistic violence” like assassinations of pacification officials with “undiscriminating acts” such as rocket attacks on refugee camps and government installations (133). The communists considered such unorthodox methods a cost-effective strategy for securing the territories in their control from RVN forces.

US-RVN pacification methods were often just as coercive. For instance, Operation Speedy Express, launched in November 1968, was ostensibly meant to pacify parts of the Mekong Delta by

7. On the debate about Westmoreland and Abrams, see further Dale Andrade, “Westmoreland Was Right: Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Vietnam War,” *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 19 (2008) 145–81.

destroying the enemy with “patrols, assaults, sweeps, ambushes, sniper team activities, and search-and-destroy operations” (153). Such actions often helped undermine the political goals of pacification.

The chronological portion of the book illustrates the issues analyzed in the thematic chapters. It also contextualizes the seesaw contest for territorial control, the negotiations in Paris, and the process of Vietnamization among the noncommunist allies. Between November 1968 and December 1971, the US-RVN allies had reason to be optimistic about their territorial gains. But the communists continued to make their presence felt, and the gradual withdrawal of US troops and problems within the Saigon military made it hard for overstretched RVN forces to hold on to newly gained territories. The Easter Offensive of spring 1972, designed to thwart pacification programs and destroy the RVN’s Air Force, turned the struggle for control of the operational environment into a mostly conventional conflict. The steady infiltration of North Vietnamese forces made the RVN’s “land-grabbing” operations during 1973–74 its last and least effective attempts to gain control.

The Control War, though occasionally dense and repetitive, provides an informative and fresh reading of the relevant evidence about the Vietnam War. It may serve as a model for new studies that use Vietnamese sources to shed further light on the perspectives of the RVN, the DRV, and the NLF. For the time being, Martin Clemis takes the Vietnamese sides seriously and improves upon earlier scholarship on pacification⁸ by his evenhanded, truly “postrevisionist” treatment of the communist and allied strategies of post-Tet warfare.

8. E.g., Richard A. Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam’s Hearts and Minds* (Boulder: Westview Pr, 1995).