

## Western industrialism vs traditional societies

# A look at America's Viet Nam

by Graham D. Taylor

The "first generation" of historical studies of American involvement in Vietnam—including two of the best, David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest* and Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*—reflected the intensely emotional and controversial character of that period in America. Halberstam and Fitzgerald provided articulate support for critics of the war, even before the release of the Pentagon Papers gave the imprimatur of official, if unauthorized, documentation to charges of inept and credulous leadership and deliberate distortion and manipulation of information about Vietnam by the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. Of more recent vintage are defenses of America's Vietnam adventure—or at least the role of the military in it—the former officials involved in the decisions, such as Maxwell Taylor in *Swords and Ploughshares* and William Westmoreland's *A Soldier Reports*, with a full-dress statement of the military view in Dave R. Palmer's *Summons of the Trumpet*. Finally the scholars are weighing in with ponderous tomes, of which the most recent example is Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam*, a study supported by the Rockefeller Foundation, drawing extensively on classified records in U.S. military archives, and published by Oxford University Press. Lewy's proclaimed goal is to cast "more light and less heat," in the approved manner of objective scholarship. Unhappily, his book reveals, as much as anything, that for Americans the wounds of the Southeast Asian debacle may still be too sensitive to be probed with the proper degree of scientific detachment. Whatever his intentions, Lewy's study is a partisan document.

The book is divided into two parts: first, a fairly straightforward narrative of American involvement in Vietnam from 1950 to, roughly, 1973, focusing primarily, if not at times in unnecessarily prolonged detail, on military developments. The second part constitutes what Lewy asserts as "an effort to find answers to some of the . . . moral ambiguities created by the war in Vietnam," including, among other topics, American bombing of North Vietnam, the use of such techniques as "free fire zones" and herbicidal warfare by U.S. forces in South Vietnam, and various war crimes and atrocities committed by both sides.

The tone of the two sections is markedly different: the narrative is appropriately neutral, devoted to reconstructing events as clearly as possible, investigating varying interpretations of such controversial issues as the Gulf of Tonkin affair in 1964, and includes a detailed critique of the "pacification program," (that effort to "win the hearts and minds of the people" that was so often proclaimed by American officials but never seriously undertaken). The second part of the book, by contrast, takes the

nature of a brief to defend the American government against charges of violations of international law in the conduct of the war. The object of his arguments are anti-war critics who, he maintains, launched irresponsible accusations against the United States

vision reporters are regarded with considerably less enthusiasm, sometimes being charged with deliberate distortion of events to support presumed anti-war predilections.)

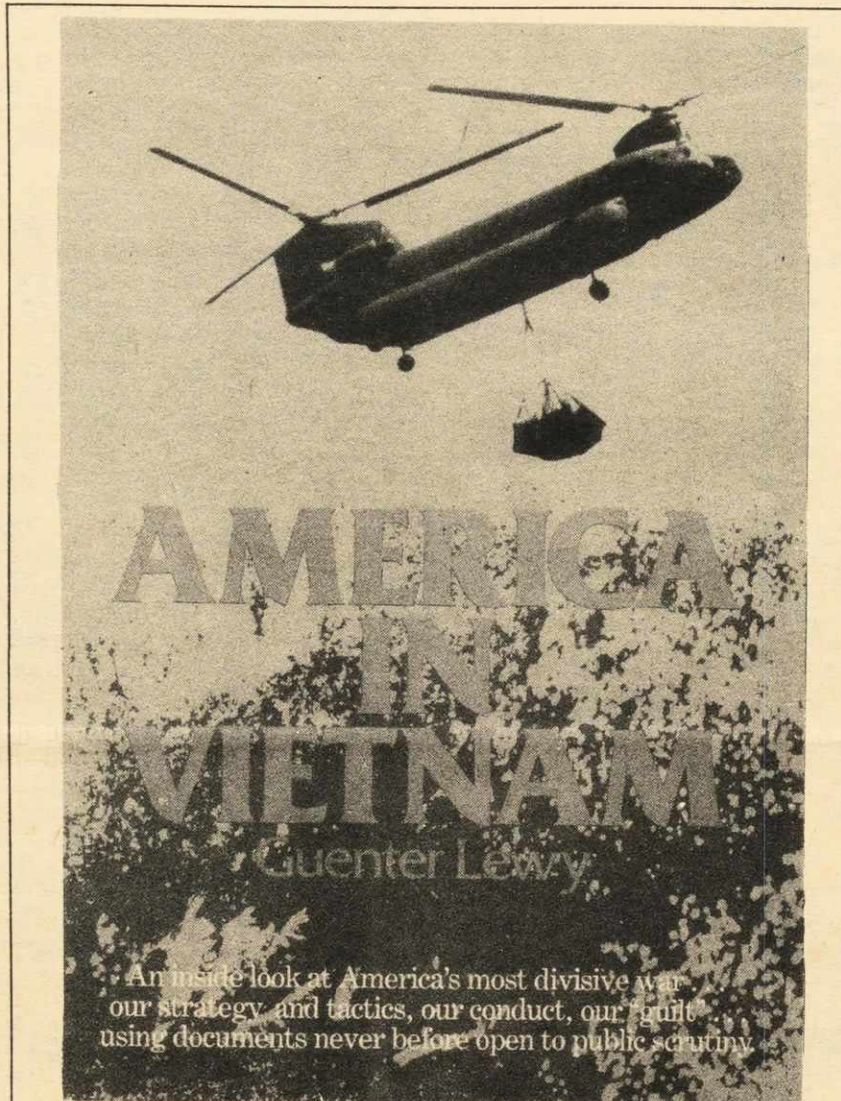
On the other hand, the military are seen as almost completely

both hawks and doves as the war which John F. Kennedy characterized as a "laboratory . . . experiment" in counter-insurgency ground remorselessly on. Not surprisingly, Lewy finds these rational, articulate people preferable to myopic professional soldiers and "shrill" anti-war critics.

The influence of this implicit partisanship surfaces even in his discussion of the war crimes issue. Lewy admits that the My Lai massacre was not unique, but argues that these incidents were the result of local conditions of military frustration or overly zealous unit commanders, and points to the Rules of Engagement instituted as policy to demonstrate that the higher command cannot be judged responsible in any direct way for war crimes. Other accounts of Vietnamese ground operations, however, indicate an unprecedented degree of observations and intervention by officers up the chain of command, and air strikes were often supervised directly from the White House. Although Lewy argues in great detail that forcible population relocation, the establishment of "free fire zones," and the use of defoliants and assorted other instruments of sophisticated mayhem were technically within the existing rules of warfare, he dodges the question of responsibility of American policy makers, military and civilian, who can hardly have been unaware that these practices inflicted incredible misery on the Vietnamese people far out of proportion to any military accomplishments.

This study is not without its virtues. Lewy is by no means an uncritical admirer of civilian American leaders, noting that they grossly exaggerated the strategic importance of Vietnam, and persistently ignored evidence that the South Vietnamese government could not arouse popular support, and indeed seemed less concerned for the welfare of the Vietnamese people than the Americans themselves. His account of the failure of the pacification program is well organized and perceptive. Yet the book is disappointing in the end, for the emphasis is on refuting the charges of anti-war critics and questioning their motives, and defending the military policies of American civilian leaders. At some point the scholars must stop refighting these old battles, and try to place the Vietnamese war in the broader perspectives of Asian history and the confrontation of Western industrial nations and traditional societies.

Guenter Lewy, *AMERICA IN VIETNAM*. N.Y.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978. 540 pp.



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while overlooking the systematic terrorism and torture of prisoners practiced by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese

Despite these variations in the tone and content of different parts of the book, there are certain themes that run through it, most notably Lewy's assessment of American civilian and military leadership. Civilian leaders, the presidents and their advisers, are portrayed as consistently cautious and restrained, although often mistaken in their assumptions about Vietnamese affairs and the progress of the war. Further down the line CIA observers, Defense department advisers to Robert McNamara, and civilians involved in pacification such as Robert Komer, struggle valiantly, if not very effectively, to introduce a semblance of reality to the flow of misinformation from Vietnam and the making of policy in Washington. (Curiously, journalists and tele-

misguided and out of their depth in counter-insurgency warfare, but very difficult to restrain and often creating situations which constricted the range of choices available to the presidents and civilian advisers. Lewy's account of civilian-military relations contrasts strikingly with those of Westmoreland and Palmer who see White House and other civilian officials constantly monitoring and supervising military operations, even down to the level of individual bombing missions and ground unit actions.

The point is not that the military proponents are more accurate than Lewy—both are in fact relying on the same sources of information. But Lewy is no less a proponent of a special interest in this debate than Westmoreland. His "clients" are the presidential advisers, the civilians in the Pentagon, the assorted talented people Halberstam dubbed "the best and the brightest" who were the targets of

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