

# *To the Instructor*

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## **CHANGES TO THE FIFTH EDITION**

The fifth edition of *America's Longest War* continues the tradition of explaining how the United States became involved in the Vietnam War and what the consequences of this involvement were for both the Vietnamese and the Americans. New features include:

- Extensive revision of chapters based on recent scholarship on North Vietnam, the origins of the Vietnamese revolution, the First Indochina War between the Viet Minh revolutions and France, and more.
- Additional material further characterizing Lyndon B. Johnson's and Richard Nixon's opinions and actions during wartime.
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## *About the Author*

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GEORGE C. HERRING has devoted much of his career to teaching and writing about the Vietnam War. He is widely recognized as the “dean” of American scholars of that conflict.

Dr. Herring taught his first class on the war in the spring of 1973 as the last U.S. troops were returning home from Vietnam. He began research on *America's Longest War* in 1975, shortly after the fall of Saigon. First published in 1979, the book quickly established itself as a standard work in the field and enjoyed extensive classroom use. Dr. Herring has published numerous articles and essays on the war and has lectured across the United States and abroad. His books include *The Secret Diplomacy of the Vietnam War: The Negotiating Volumes of the Pentagon Papers* (1983) and *LBJ and Vietnam: A Different Kind of War* (1994). At the University of Kentucky, he directed the work of scores of doctoral and M.A. students who have also contributed significantly to the history of the Vietnam War.

A native of Virginia, Dr. Herring graduated from Roanoke College. After service in the U.S. Navy, he earned M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at the University of Virginia. He taught at the University of Kentucky from 1969 until his retirement in 2005. In 1993–1994, he was a visiting professor at the U.S. Military Academy, West Point, and in 2001 Douglas Southall Freeman Professor of History at the University of Richmond. His most recent book is *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (2008), a volume in the Oxford History of the United States Series. He lives in Lexington, Kentucky.

## *Introduction*

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“Vietnam, Vietnam . . . there are no sure answers.” So wrote the distinguished Southeast Asian correspondent Robert Shaplen in the midst of a long and traumatic war.<sup>1</sup>

More than four decades have passed since Shaplen penned those words. During that time, millions of pages of documents have been declassified and thousands of books and articles have been written. We now know a great deal more about the Vietnam War. New and exciting avenues of inquiry have been opened. It is possible to produce a much fuller, more nuanced, and multidimensional analysis.

One of the most important developments in Vietnam scholarship in recent years has been its internationalization. Studies based on European archives, for example, have shown how British and French pressures in the late 1940s contributed significantly to the first American commitment to Vietnam in 1950. New work drawing upon Soviet and Chinese archives has exposed with much greater clarity those nations’ close ties with and massive aid to North Vietnam, giving some credence to the idea of a Communist monolith, a basic premise of the U.S. policy of global containment. These studies also confirm that at critical points in Soviet and Chinese relations with each other and North Vietnam, national interests generally prevailed over ideology, sometimes with significant consequences for the war.

<sup>1</sup>Robert Shaplen, *The Road from War: Vietnam: 1965–1970* (New York, 1970), p. 283.

The most important and exciting development in recent Vietnam War scholarship has been its Vietnamization (to borrow a word from the war itself). A new generation of scholars conversant in the Vietnamese language and trained in Vietnam's history and culture are now producing pathbreaking studies based on archival materials from both South and North Vietnam that fill out the story with rich detail and sometimes dramatically alter our interpretations. Vietnamese, who were largely invisible in the early American writing on the war, have moved to the forefront. This new Vietnam War history has given us a much fuller and more sophisticated view of South Vietnam in the era of Ngo Dinh Diem and the origins and evolution of the National Liberation Front insurgency. Although North Vietnam's major wartime archives remain tightly sealed, scholars have secured some very revealing documents, which, along with other sources, have enabled them to shed much light on policy-making in Hanoi, a topic once completely enshrouded in mystery. This new research makes answers to some of our questions more "sure," to use Shaplen's word, and answers to all of them more complex and still controversial.

I have attempted to integrate this new scholarship into the fifth edition of *America's Longest War*. I have extensively revised the first three chapters based on new information about the origins of the Vietnamese revolution, the First Indochina War between the Viet Minh revolutionaries and France, the coming to power of the Diem regime in South Vietnam and its increasingly tenuous and volatile relations with the United States. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 incorporate new scholarship clarifying North Vietnam's decision to launch an end-the-war offensive in 1964, its 1965–1966 response to U.S. escalation, and the 1968 Tet Offensive. Material has also been added from Lyndon Johnson's fascinating and often quite revealing telephone conversations elucidating his sometimes painful ambivalence about escalation of the war—and his fierce determination not to "lose" South Vietnam.

The last two chapters also incorporate important new material dealing with the climatic events leading up to the Easter Offensive of 1972, the abortive peace agreement of October 1972, the Paris Peace Accords of January 1973, and their implementation—and nonimplementation—in the two years leading to the fall of Saigon. In the last decade, vast new resources have also been made available for the Nixon presidency, including verbatim records of telephone

conversations and long, sometimes meandering, and always absorbing White House policy discussions. They clarify—yet in some ways render more murky—Nixon’s handling of the war. They reveal a great deal about his personality and mind-set while also making clear the difficulties he labored under—some of his own making—and the extent to which an extraordinarily complex war at times reduced this sophisticated geopolitical thinker to improvisation. After years of enmity, the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam are now discussing a strategic partnership. The last chapter has been updated to take into account this and other major developments since the turn of the twenty-first century.

This book seeks to place U.S. intervention in Vietnam in historical perspective. I have given the most detailed treatment to the years 1963–1973, the decade of heaviest American involvement. But I have also devoted considerable attention to the period 1950–1963. The assumptions that led to the crucial commitments took form during those years. In addition, as CIA operative Edward Lansdale, himself a key player in these events, once observed, without an understanding of this formative period, “one is a spectator arriving in the middle of a complex drama, without true knowledge of the plot or of the identity and motivation of those in the drama.”<sup>2</sup>

This is not primarily a military history. Rather, in keeping with the original purpose of the “America in Crisis” series, it attempts to integrate military, diplomatic, and political factors to explain America’s involvement and ultimate failure in Vietnam. My focus is on the United States, but I have sought to provide sufficient discussion of other nations to permit a rounded account of these major events.

The questions I raised in the first edition of this book remain central today. Why did the United States make such a vast commitment of blood and treasure in an area seemingly of so little importance to it, a place where before 1945 it had scarcely been involved? What did it attempt to do during the quarter century of its involvement there? Why, despite the expenditure of more than \$150 billion, the loss of more than 58,000 lives, application of the most up-to-date technology and a vast arsenal of destructive force did the world’s most powerful nation fail to achieve its objectives and suffer its first defeat in war, a humiliating and deeply frustrating experience for a

<sup>2</sup>Quoted in W. Scott Thompson and Donaldson D. Frizzell, *The Lessons of Vietnam* (New York, 1977), p. 43.

people accustomed to success. What have been the consequences for Americans, Vietnamese, and others of the nation's longest and most divisive war?

The U.S. war in Vietnam was a logical, if by no means inevitable, outgrowth of its Cold War world view and the policy of containment that Americans in and out of government accepted without serious question for more than two decades. The concept of containment of communist expansion provided the broad parameters in which the Vietnam commitment took shape. Some writers have argued that the dictates of the Cold War consensus were so compelling that policymakers had little choice but to follow where they led. Recent scholarship has challenged this view. At each step on the long road to war alternatives were presented and discussed; choices were available. That presidents chose escalation was not primarily a result of blind obeisance to the dictates of ideology.

Why *were* such commitments made? It was not a case of overzealous advisers leading busy presidents blindly into a quagmire, as some early writers contended. The dangers and pitfalls were apparent. Nor was it a matter of hubris, of leaders plunging ahead certain of the efficacy of American power, confident that the United States would prevail, as it always had. Each president did take office believing that he could succeed where his predecessor had failed, a conviction that influenced early decisions in each administration. Even after they became more aware of the problems, some presidents may have clung to the belief that things would somehow work out in the end. In time, the commitment took on a life of its own, as important in and of itself as the aims it was originally designed to achieve. Presidents repeatedly held on in Vietnam in the belief that success or at least not failing was vital to maintaining America's credibility and world position.

Domestic politics was a crucial part of this calculation. Especially after Harry S. Truman's "loss" of China in 1949 and the huge political consequences that seemed to follow it, no president wanted to "lose" Vietnam. Policymakers repeatedly warned in the 1950s and 1960s that the fall of South Vietnam would set off the collapse of "dominoes" throughout Southeast Asia. Pointing to domestic political exigencies, Leslie Gelb argued many years ago that the White House was the "essential domino."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>Leslie Gelb, "The Essential Domino: American Politics and Vietnam," *Foreign Affairs* 50 (April 1972): 459-475.

Personality also played a major role in the decision-making process. A strange sequence of events conspired to place Lyndon Baines Johnson and Richard Milhous Nixon in office at crucial points in the history of U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The personalities and leadership styles of these powerful and driven but deeply insecure individuals exerted crucial influence on the decisions to go to war, the manner in which the war was fought and ultimately ended, and especially the ways in which dissent at home was handled.

I still believe that U.S. intervention in Vietnam was misguided. It can be argued that the containment policy worked in Europe, contributing significantly, maybe even decisively, to the outcome of the Cold War. That said, I am persuaded that containment was misapplied in Vietnam. Obsessed with their determination to stop the advance of Communism, and abysmally ignorant of the Vietnamese people and their history, Americans profoundly misread the nature of the struggle in Vietnam, its significance for their vital interests, and its susceptibility to their influence.

Defeat came hard, and in its aftermath it has been fashionable for many Americans to argue that victory could have been attained if the United States had only fought the war more decisively or in a different way. Such views are perhaps comforting for a people spoiled by success. They accord with what the English scholar D. W. Brogan once called “the illusion of American omnipotence,” the belief, almost an article of faith among Americans, that this nation can do anything it sets its mind to. The enduring “lesson” of the Vietnam War is that power, no matter how great, has limits. American power in Vietnam was constrained by the Cold War, in whose name, ironically, it was fought. It was limited by the weakness of America’s client, South Vietnam, and by the determination and willingness of its foes—North Vietnam and the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam—to pay any price. Given these circumstances, I do not believe that the war could have been won in any meaningful sense or at a moral or a material price Americans would—or should—have been willing to pay.

The costs of these mistakes—crimes, some would say—still stagger the imagination: 58,000 Americans dead, a deep wound to the national psyche, deep-seated and still lingering domestic divisions. For the Vietnamese, the cost was much, much higher, as many as 3 to 4 million dead, an estimated 300,000 North Vietnamese and NLF missing in action, the devastation of



a beautiful country, and enormous ecological costs. These costs, many of which are still being paid today on both sides, make it urgent, especially in the wake of failed interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, that Americans better understand one of the most traumatic events in their history and what it can tell them about themselves and how they deal with other peoples.

It has become conventional wisdom that the war in Afghanistan already has or will soon become the longest war in which the United States has been engaged. In an age when wars rarely begin with formal declarations and end with ceremonial surrenders, it can be very difficult to pinpoint exactly when they begin and end. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has suggested, for example, that the United States has fought two wars in Afghanistan, one in 2001–2002, a smashing success, the other beginning in 2006 with the resurgence of the Taliban.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the wars in Vietnam lasted for almost three decades, beginning with Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence from France on September 2, 1945, and ending with the fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975. During much of this time, the United States was deeply involved. By 1950, the assumptions upon which subsequent escalation was based were firmly set. By 1954, the United States was paying close to 80 percent of France's war against the Viet Minh. The Second Indochina War—what the Vietnamese call the American War—began in 1959–1960; the first Americans were killed in July 1959. In 1961–1962, John F. Kennedy “initiated the process through which the United States assumed a combat role,” as Defense Department historian John Carland has put it, a process completed by Lyndon Johnson.<sup>5</sup> Because of its quarter century involvement in the wars in Indochina, the devastating impact of those wars at home and abroad, and consequences that lingered long after, Vietnam can still lay strong claim to the dubious distinction of being America's longest war.

<sup>4</sup>Terry H. Anderson, *Bush's Wars* (New York, 2011), p. 211.

<sup>5</sup>John Carland, “When Did the Vietnam War Start for the United States?” June 17, 2012, copy in author's possession.

## *Acknowledgments*

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exciting—and challenging—of the four. I would like to make special mention of my colleague Hang Nguyen, whose prize-winning scholarship has forced us to rethink so much about the war and whose presence at UK keeps alive a tradition of interest in Southeast Asia going back before my time. We treasure the friendship of Hang; her spouse, Paul Chamberlin, an accomplished historian of U.S. foreign relations; and Leila.

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I have dedicated this book, with all my love, to my son, John; my daughter, Lisa; their spouses Christy and Peter; and to my very special grandchildren, Andrew, Madeline, and Kennedy; Caili, Jonathan, and Emma.

George C. Herring