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## A Better Understanding of the Vietnam War

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Thanks to Senator Kerry for his excellent and very accurate article in *Newsweek*, “Beware the Revisionists,” on the serious flaws of a certain strain of Vietnam War history. This flawed history coalesces around a number of highly problematic assumptions like the war could have been won if the United States had not lost its political will because by 1972 pacification was working, or that more troops could have done the trick, or that better tactics and methods earlier applied in 1965 could have won the war. Senator Kerry’s points concerning this flawed Vietnam history is actually supported by a general consensus of scholarly historians that still is in line with one of the most well known and respected of them all, Professor George Herring of the University of Kentucky, who states in his book *The Longest War* that for the United States:

*...the war could [not] have been ‘won’ in any meaningful sense at a moral or material cost most Americans deemed acceptable.*

Herring’s clear and profound observation of the Vietnam War is still correct and supported by a consensus of historians. Yet there has been this incorrect interpretation of the history of Vietnam that argues that when the wrong General (Westmoreland) was removed after the Tet Offensive in 1968 and the right General was put in place (Abrams) things then turned around on a dime, the American Army started doing classic Coin and had actually pacified the South—had essentially won the war through better Coin tactics—but the American people and their political leaders lost their will and therefore the war. No, this interpretation is dubious.

The United States lost the war in Vietnam not because it didn’t get Coin, or screwed up at the tactical level of war, but because it failed at Strategy. As the Chinese philosopher of War Sun Tzu most eloquently stated a long time ago but still rings true today; “strategy without tactics is the slow road to victory,” but “tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat.” In Vietnam because the United States failed at strategy and because the Vietnamese communist enemy wanted victory more, there was nothing but noise. It is within that greater context of Sun Tzu’s noise that these flawed histories of Vietnam (for example Sorley’s *A Better War*; Krepinevich’s *The Army and Vietnam*; and Nagl’s, *Learning to Eat Soup with a Knife*) operate and flourish.

Samplings of examples of scholarly histories that have cast doubt on these flawed explanations of the war are:

Ronald Spector, *Advice and Support: The Early Years* (1985)

Graham A. Cosmas, *MACV: The Joint Command in the Years of Withdrawal, 1968-1973* (2007)

John M. Shaw, *The Cambodian Campaign: The 1970 Offensive and America's Vietnam War* (2005)

Andrew Birtle, "PROVN, Westmoreland, and the Historians," (*Journal of Military History*, 2009)

Richard Hunt, *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* (1995)

Bergerud, Eric, *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province* (1993)

Boylan, Kevin "The Red Queen's Race: Operation Washington Green and Pacification in Binh Dinh Province, 1969-1970" (*Journal of Military History*, 2009).

Yet in spite of this historical consensus the flawed history dominates common understanding of the Vietnam War and is deployed in dizzying and frustrating ways. The recent book on the Iraq War by writers Greg Jaffe and David Cloud, *The Fourth Star*, accept the flawed history as established fact. New York Times writer Dexter Filkins in a recent glowing review of the book, also mindlessly used the flawed Vietnam history. It is striking that these three writers, who have done some very good reporting in Iraq and Afghanistan, so utterly failed to do a simple check of the historical literature to get a sense of where the field is actually at and in so doing would have realized the highly problematic and contested nature of the "war was winnable" thesis.

But perhaps Senator Kerry's piece is a start at getting a better understanding of the history of the Vietnam War. Such a better understanding is crucial if we are to proceed ahead in Afghanistan with a clear eye to strategy and not become mired in the noise of tactics and methods that promise a better war in the Hindu Kush just like the flawed histories of Vietnam tell us that there was a better war to be found in the Central Highlands and jungles of Vietnam.

*The author is a serving Army Colonel. He commanded a Cavalry Squadron in West Baghdad in 2006.*

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