

The Vietnam War was a house of folly until the end

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By Glenn C. Altschuler

As he looked out on the Mekong Delta waterway at Ban Don near the Cambodian border, George Bonville, a member of the A-team of the Special Forces, wondered why men were fighting for control of Vietnam. “It is an agricultural paradise,” Mr. Bonville maintained, “where anybody with a brain can live, work and be comfortable. Only evil people can make war in this place — egad, I thought, I guess I am part of them. But I did not start this disaster. I only hoped to end it.”

For more than 30 years, Vietnam was a killing field. The war ended disastrously, first for France, and then the United States. But, as Max Hastings reminds us in “Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975,” the Vietnamese people suffered the most from the conflict.

**"VIETNAM: AN EPIC TRAGEDY,
1945-1975"**
By Max Hastings
HarperCollins (\$37.50).

In the book Mr. Hastings, a British journalist who has written more than two dozen books, including accounts of World War II, the Korean War, and clashes in the Falklands and Northern Ireland, draws on extensive archival research and dozens of interviews with participants on all sides, in a comprehensive and compelling narrative that illuminates political and military tactics and strategies — and the daily realities of a war that killed 2 million people.

Mr. Hastings endorses the scathing indictment of American policy that is now a consensus among historians. President Lyndon Johnson’s “fatal error,” he indicates, was to make an almost unlimited commitment to South Vietnam, “where its real strategic interest was miniscule.” The Saigon government was not supported by the people, and the presence of hundreds of thousands of troops wearing sunglasses, helmets and body armor that “gave them the appearance of robots empowered to kill” only legitimized Hanoi.

President Richard Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Mr. Hastings adds, “presided over gratuitous years of carnage, merely to conceal from the American electorate, for their own partisan purposes, the inevitability of humiliation in Indochina.” Mr. Hastings dismisses as “strategic illiteracy” claims that the United States could have prevailed if it had unleashed all of its military

might on North Vietnam.

The book also includes some important revisions to standard accounts of the war. Citing a 1992 study, Mr. Hastings suggests that poor people and members of minority groups in the United States may not have borne an “unjust share” of the burden. While 30 percent of Americans killed in the war came from the lowest third of the economic pyramid, 26 percent came from the highest. Of combat deaths, 12.5 percent were blacks and 5 percent Hispanic, loss rates lower than groups’ proportions of draft-age males.

As he documents the incompetence and immorality of the leaders of South Vietnam and the United States, Mr. Hastings points out that “these unpalatable realities” are only half of “the rightful story.” In the 1960s and ‘70s, the mass media and anti-Vietnam War activists “were ignorant of, or blind to, the tyranny prevailing in the North, which was inflicting worse hardships on its own people.”

Surprisingly, perhaps, Mr. Hastings insists that the decision of the U.S. Congress “to half choke the aid pipe to Saigon while the Russians and Chinese kept open their own” in 1974 was “indefensible.” Acknowledging that \$945 million was eventually allocated, but also recognizing that more weapons and air strikes would not have changed the outcome, he declares that continued aid “might have gone far to preserve America’s honor in the last phase of the war, while withdrawal tarnished it.” Mr. Hastings does assess the cost, in death and destruction, of prolonging the inevitable.

That said, Max Hastings is surely right to direct attention to the trauma, torture and death visited on Vietnamese soldiers and citizens on both sides. As fighting wound down, a South Vietnamese officer recalled, “There was no time to cry. I was just wondering how to survive.” Given a chance to leave the country, Lt. Khiem begged his parents to accompany him. His mother insisted she must look after her father. After an emotional farewell, Lt. Khiem boarded a boat, learned from his portable radio that the government of South Vietnam had surrendered, and joined in the orgy of tears and prayers.

The government of South Vietnam was history. With the country in the hands of a vengeful North Vietnamese regime, the travails of the Vietnamese people were by no means over.

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