



Vietnam: A History

Stanley Karnow

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"The most comprehensive, up-to-date, and balanced account

we have."—*Boston Globe*. "Superb, balanced in interpretation...

immensely readable and full of new and interesting detail."—George Herring, Univ. of Kentucky.

Vietnam: A History Details

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From Reader Review Vietnam: A History for online ebook

Ian Kemp says

A very detailed study of not just the military dimension but the underlying political motivations and manoeuvres which created and sustained the 'vietnam war'. The author has a mature but never cynical position which not surprisingly exposes the unprincipled actions of the few that created suffering for the many.

Only one thing about this book shocked me - the resonance and even clear parallels with actions in our own decade with the US offensive in Iraq. The book exposes a litany of distortion, censorship and outright lying for US domestic political purposes, as well as abduction and 'rendition' of prisoners; it's all too easy to assume that the same approaches are equally active today.

Erik Graff says

Although I grew up during and was significantly affected by the invasion of Vietnam by the USA, although I had been substantially active in opposing the war and had read a great deal of material on the subject, this is the first real history of Vietnam I have completed.

It is not a perfect history. Based on research Karnow had conducted for a multipart, award-winning television documentary, it is too focused on the United States to constitute a real history of Vietnam. Further, his treatment is shallow in that it does little to explain why--not how, but why--the United States has had such an historical affinity for unpopular dictatorships and antipathy for popular movements. Finally, although he mentions the book as a source, Karnow fails to discuss the material covered in McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin in Southeast Asia*, particularly the economic importance of the drug trade for sustaining, if not motivating, much of American foreign policy.

On the positive side, however, Karnow did have substantial on-the-ground experience working as a journalist in Vietnam and did interview many of the Vietnamese principals, North and South. Further, he does attempt to give some historical background to the country and its culture in his first couple of chapters.

Finishing it today, I was left with the sobering enigma of the evils committed and/or countenanced by the leadership of the United States in my, in our name. Some of it is ignorance, of course, and Karnow gives many instances of that at the highest reaches of government and the military, but some of it is simply mysterious to me. How can anyone justify the killing of over a million people, most of them civilians, in our campaigns in SE Asia? How, indeed, now, can President Obama and his administration carry on our aggressive occupations of Afghanistan (the current primary source of the world's heroin, q.v. McCoy's *The Politics of Heroin*) and Iraq? What is it in the system that promotes such morally depraved persons to power?

Scott says

This is very thorough and well-written history of Vietnam, although it is largely presented in the context of America's involvement in the Vietnam War. While there is some great background about Vietnam's deeper history and a good overview of the French involvement in Indochina, this book's strength lies in the incredible information provided about the political and military decisions and actions of the U.S., the South Vietnam regimes, the Viet Cong, and the North Vietnam government. For anyone who was alive at the time, this will provide a great deal of important background information to the way the war was presented at home. Anyone wondering why this war continues to play such an important role in America's psyche should read this book.

Isabel says

This is an amazing book. I loved how it started at the end--in this moment in history when Vietnam is something we see the effects of casually every day. Karnow opens with a series of observations about how Vietnam has colored the political view of Americans today. There are photographs of the VN Memorial, veterans marching on (and at) Washington, families fleeing VN and American families fostering VN people... I remember growing up with Vietnamese kids in class and wondering what their deal was. Now, living in Northern Virginia, I see lots of Vietnamese-Americans and still have questions. Having finished this book, most of them are answered now.

Karnow approaches history from the unique perspective of a journalist and a historian. His writing is vivid, personal and still informed and occasionally even academic. This book combines the military and political aspects of the war to create a more comprehensive picture than all the social histories I'd come across before. The social bits are still in there, they just enhance the other picture instead of taking over the book.

Points he made that really impressed me: drug addiction among the troops, the economic and social effect of having an American military operation in Saigon for decades, the personal and political intrigues in both the US and Vietnam, the distrust between the Soviet Union, China and Vietnam, how the expat Vietnamese were treated in Cambodia, how the war changed over the years, the sheer duration of Vietnam's struggle for independence (Karnow takes the history back to the age of explorers and French missionary activity in SE Asia), how both inflated ideas of success *and* failure of the military actions on both sides were corrected by dispassionate review decades later... Tons of details added up to make a comprehensive picture (for once!). I've had so many loose ends in my head for so long about Vietnam. I really enjoyed having them come together to make some kind of sense.

After reading over 650 pages of history, I thought I'd just shut the book and move on, but actually, even the appendices were readable and useful. The timeline at the end extends beyond the history in the book, bringing the end of the "conflict" (? I'm still not sure what to call it, actually) into the larger context of full diplomatic relations between the US and VN during the Clinton administration. The final entry in the timeline is 1996: "Vietnam attends the Olympic Games for the first time ever on American soil, in Atlanta, Georgia." Such a brilliant ending point (again combining the political and the social) for this history!

Matt says

The bookshelves lining every wall of my office attest to the many different historical topics that have interested me over the years. There are books on the Romans, the Zulus, and the Irish. A history of Israel leans against a biography of Woodrow Wilson. An entire shelf is sagging beneath my recent fascination with World War I. There are more books about Nazis than I'm proud to admit.

Curiously lacking from what I humbly perceive to be a wide-ranging selection of topics, are books about the Vietnam War. To be sure, I have three books about Dien Bien Phu, the famous final battle of the First Indochina War. But I only owned one volume concerning America's involvement, and that book had sat unread on my shelf for over twenty years and ten different residences.

The reason: in my opinion, there's been too little time for the dust to settle. Good history does not come out of passionate emotion. There needs to be a fair passage of years before we can start to look objectively at an event. America's Vietnam War is still too firmly imbedded in living memory and experience. It is also far too politicized – if you ask a person on the street to give their thoughts on Vietnam in one sentence, I'm fairly certain you can determine their political outlook based on that response.

So that's the reason I had not read that book on my shelf, Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*, from 1983 (a book published in conjunction with a PBS miniseries).

The reason I read it is much simpler. It really bothered me that I had had left a book unread on my shelf for over two decades.

Karnow's *Vietnam: A History* bills itself as a complete account of Vietnam at war. And it is certainly comprehensive. It begins in 1787, with Monsignor Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau de Behaine (ironically, we share the same name) returning to France to sell his King on the idea of a Christian empire in Asia. It ends almost seven hundred pages and almost two hundred years later, with America's exit from Vietnam ("Peace with Honor") and the subsequent fall of American-backed South Vietnam. The story in between is a sad one, a tale of colonizers and the colonized, of insurgencies, terrorism, torture, and eventually wide-scale modern war. If Karnow establishes any kind of tone, it is one of mournfulness. (His first chapter is titled "The War Nobody One." His last chapter is called "The Peace that Never Was").

The thing that most stood out to me while reading *Vietnam: A History* was its readability. Vietnam is a thorny, complex, fraught subject. Karnow has created an accessible primer. The book is designed for readers, such as myself, who are new to the subject. Each chapter begins with a photo montage that previews events to follow. At the end of the book, Karnow includes a detailed chronology *and* a *dramatis personae*. These little touches do wonders in making a new (for me) and difficult subject easier to understand.

Vietnam: A History also has the advantage of being written by a respected journalist and historian. Karnow was educated at Harvard and the Sorbonne. He covered Asia for fifteen years, working for a variety of media outlets. During that period, he saw the entirety of the Second Indochina War, pitting America against North Vietnam. His book is deeply sourced, and includes his own experiences on the ground, as well as numerous interviews that he did, both contemporaneously and after the fact. (He was able to visit a newly reunified Vietnam and speak with many of the Vietnamese principals, which was no small thing back then, the war being over only a handful of years).

The first third of the book – covering the early French colonial experience, the Japanese and Vichy French

co-occupation during World War II, and the First Indochina War, which saw the withdrawal of France from Vietnam – is informative but relatively dry. There are certainly better and more energetic books about the First Indochina War (I'm thinking, here, of Bernard Fall).

Things become better paced and more engaging with the fall of Ngo Dinh Diem (assassinated following a coup) and the increased participation of the American military. Some of the uptick in quality arises from Karnow's ability to draw on his personal experiences. (Obviously, Karnow was not reporting from Vietnam during the time of Monsignor Pierre Joseph Georges Pigneau de Behaine).

Due to the vast subject-matter involved, Karnow takes a necessarily macro point of view. Certainly, this is not a military history. For the most part, battles are not even mentioned (though the chronology fills in a lot of gaps). Karnow's narrative is heavily tilted toward the political machinations, with the military and experiential aspects of the war mostly on the sidelines.

As I mentioned above, the Vietnam War remains a polarizing issue. Karnow's book hovers above the fray. He is equable in his handling of the major figures – Ho Chi Minh, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon – and never really advances a unified argument or attempts to place blame. Mostly, his book reads as cosmic tragedy rather than the result of any particular mendacity. Stanley Karnow did end up on Nixon's enemies list, but I've come to the conclusion that that really wasn't a singular achievement, and probably happened to anyone who dared report the actual conditions in Vietnam.

Ultimately, I found this to be a very good intro book. Intellectually, it gave me a great framework from which to start a wider study of the Vietnam War. I was less impressed by its literary merits. When I first cracked the cover, I had an outside hope that this might rise to the level of James McPherson's *Battle Cry of Freedom* (a seminal one-volume work on the American Civil War). Unfortunately, it does reach – or even strive – for those heights. Karnow's achievement with *Vietnam: A History* is clarity. For a topic like this, that is a worthwhile accomplishment.

David says

When I asked an expert for the best book about Vietnam, this is the one he recommended. It is great. It has the full sweep and pageantry of history. However, if you are the type of person who gets a headache when they watch a country do something incredibly stupid in slow motion, then DON'T read this book.

Matt says

Karnow presents a spectacular historical look at the War in Vietnam and how things got out of hand for numerous US Administrations. It also gives an excellent historical context of where things went wrong and how the war that seemed so simple on paper went so wrong. It was, truly, one that tore a nation apart and divided generations of Americans, still healing from the Second and Korean Wars. Karnow uses his journalistic abilities to properly place Vietnam in the larger scale of things and to show how the US entered the war, the apparent Goliath, and exited with their tails between their legs. A major gaffe for Presidents Johnson and Nixon, Vietnam surely ruined their administrations, as greedy inebriated them with a splash of power.

Karnow does not stand on the sidelines and simply lament the losses from a US perspective, he gives as full a picture as he can, using interviews with many on both sides of the war to better illustrate what was going on inside the war rooms, in the jungles, and within the Oval Office. He pulls no punches and does not leave anyone unscathed. Where things went wrong, the spotlight shines down on them and where praise is deserved, it is surely showered upon the victors. I remained stunned throughout that the juggernaut known as the US military could not penetrate the rag-tag North Vietnamese Communists. It was not even a puppet war (both Cold War powers backing their respective sides), but hundreds of thousands of US troops died for what?

Having not lived through it whatsoever, I relied solely on the famous photos and news clips I'd seen on the entire debacle. I can now say that I have a much better idea of the follies and their creators. I can see just how disgraceful the US ended up being as a small Communist country booted them out, wounded and afraid of staying any longer. While the parallels are not as apparent, could the current two wasted wars be similar? Iraq and Afghanistan are surely spheres where the US does not belong, as they poked their Bush-led noses to flex their Popeye muscles. Too bad they come out looking like Jabba the Hut, without the intelligence! Only time will tell how long the US will keep their heads in the sand and pray for victory, even as the last chopper pulls away and all that's left is disgrace and ruin.

Kudos Mr. Karnow! Well written, spendidly presented, and thoroughly enjoyable!

M.L. Rio says

A more accurate subtitle for this book might be 'A Political History.' Nonetheless epic, Karnow manages to chronicle the conflicts that culminated with the North Vietnamese takeover of Saigon in 1975 with impressive narrative clarity. For anyone hoping to make sense of how the undeclared Vietnam war came about and eventually unraveled, this is essential reading (and Karnow makes no bones about it: intractable political egos were largely to blame). However, the more harrowing conflicts on the ground are minimized or largely glossed (Hamburger Hill, for instance, merits only a single paragraph), so at times the actual war feels like a distant backdrop for the bloodless battles raging in Washington.

Evan says

This is a big one. It was the basis of one of the best documentary series' ever broadcast: "Vietnam: A Television History" on PBS in the early '80s. It was one of the great multi-part limited series, like Ken Burns' "The Civil War" or "Eyes on the Prize (I&II)".

I had this book in my collection for at least 15 years before finally tackling it almost two years ago. I found the earlier parts of the book more fascinating, the long history of Vietnam, its culture and rulers and politics and the unfortunate legacy of constant conquest and invasion. It's a history that most Americans still do not know anymore than they do when they stumble into other countries that have also had long histories of outside occupation. If we did know, we might understand why the natives get a little resentful, regardless of our own self-perceived good intentions. The book is primarily Vietnam-focused until the American part of the Vietnam war begins and then it shifts more often than not into the war room with LBJ and less on the ground in Vietnam. Still, this is a fair and balanced book; a good place to start to learn about this country and the great war that defined it in the 20th century.

Booknblues says

Stanley Karnow's **Vietnam; A History** is a monumental undertaking for both the author and the reader tracing the history of Vietnam and its quest for freedom through the ages up until the 1980's when the book was published.

Karnow is well qualified to write this text, with a career reporting on Vietnam that dates back to the 1950's . I was impressed with the interviews he did to write the book in many cases interview people who fought on both sides of a battle. It was enlightening to read the North Vietnamese perspective.

The first half of the book was slow going for me providing a history of Vietnams struggle for independence and the difficulty the French had in trying to maintain it as a colony. I was very interested in learning about Ho Chi Min who was little more than a picture. Karnow was able to flesh him out and I have a found a great respect for the man, who worked so hard for an independent country.

The book began moving along for me during the sixties when I was growing up. Kennedy , Johnson and Nixon seemed to be repeating the same mistakes which the French had made in Vietnam. Karnow was also able to give us insight into the politics and mechanizations behind the presidential politics. He tells about a study done during Johnson's presidency in 1966 which found:

"The bombing campaign, the study said, was having "no measurable direct effect" on enemy military activities -- and it restated the familiar reasons for that evaluation: North Vietnam was "basically a subsistence agricultural economy" that presented an "unrewarding target" for air raids; the volume of supplies sent south was too small to be stopped by air strikes and, in any case, the country had ample manpower to keep its primitive logistical net work intact; intelligence estimates showed that infiltration into the south had risen since the bombing began and could continue to increase; and Chines and Soviet assistance was more than compensating for the damage being inflicted."

And yet the bombing continued.

Karnow recounts how a speech writer for Johnson, MacPherson's opinion shifted by what he saw on television as many Americans opinions shifted watching the images on tv:

"I watched the invasion of the American embassy compound and the terrible sight of General Loan killing the Vietcong captive. You got a sense of the awfulness, the endlessness of the war--and though it sounds naive, the unethical quality of a war in which a prisoner is hot at point-blank range. I put aside the confidential cables. I was more persuaded by the tube and by the newspapers. I was fed up with the optimism that seem to flow without stopping from Saigon"

And then there was Nixon who wanted to get America out of Vietnam honorably but continued to make the same mistakes of the previous administrations:

"The real problem" he wrote, "is that the enemy is willing to sacrifice in order to win, while the South Vietnamese simply aren't' willing to pay that much of a price in order to avoid losing."

"Nixon's observation was not original. It merely restated the dilemma that had confounded the United States since the very beginning of its intervention in Vietnam. the Communist were prepared to accept appalling

casualties for the sake of minimal gains.”

The Vietnam War was truly a trying time for America and as someone who came of age in this time period I wanted to understand it better. It was indeed a bog, a quagmire which we wandered into with noble intentions without understanding the intentions or the tenacity of the Vietnamese people. I highly recommend Karnow's book for anyone interested despite it being such a prodigious work.

Stephen Douglas Rowland says

Beginning with an informative history of Vietnam that goes back centuries and ending very abruptly with the fall of Saigon in 1975, this bulky tome predominantly deals with the internal disputes and intrigues within the United States government during America's involvement (administrations from Eisenhower to Ford). And that tends to be repetitious, and often not very interesting. A huge portion of this book details Lyndon Johnson's dealings. Only approximately 80 pages at the end focus on Nixon, which I found surprising. Published in 1982, I'm sure better books on the conflict have been written since.

James Steele says

"Colonial policy is the daughter of industrial policy." --Jules Ferry

"I respect those who have fallen bravely, but they have reaped what they have sown. ... They attack the Vietnamese, violate their rights, then call them murderers when they defend themselves." --contemporary of captain Henri Rivière, 1883

You only have to read the first two chapters to understand the origins of the conflict in Vietnam, and why it should never have happened.

Most if not all of the world's present conflicts have their roots in colonialism. If not for European powers expanding into African, South American, and Asian nations to exploit the resources and the cheap labor, spreading the idea that capitalism equals oppression and foreign invasion, communism would never have risen up as a preferable alternative. As with terrorism today, freedom from foreign rule was the goal.

It began in the 1800's when the French (acting on behalf of vested business interests but using the "humanitarian" excuse of protecting French missionaries in the region) invaded, installed a puppet government to keep the people quelled, and took land and resources but gave little back to the people.

Resentment stewed for almost a century until WWII. Japan, seeking colonies of its own in order to gain prominence as a world power (as European nations had done for centuries), expanded into other nations, including the region encompassing Vietnam. The Vietnamese rebelled against the Japanese and continued to rebel past the official end of the second World War. Many of these factions united under the banner of Communism, but their mission was autonomy for Vietnam and ending the oppressive colonial practices. The US funded France's efforts to hold onto their Asian colony, but eventually the French were defeated, and a peace conference in Geneva negotiated a ceasefire which split the country into North and South, similar to Korea.

The US funded and defended the government in the South, under president Diem, while the Soviet Union and China gave aid to the North, under Ho Chi Minh. Elections were supposed to be held to reunify the country under one government with representation by all factions, but the regime in the South had no interest in sharing power within a democratic system. Instead of winning the hearts and minds of the people, the leaders were more concerned with consolidating power and removing dissident voices. The United States became associated with this oppressive regime in the minds of the people. The result was public resentment, which drove many people to sympathize with the communists, believing if this was democracy, the other side can only be better.

The US had a covert interest in seeing the South Vietnamese government succeed, as they believed the communists in the North were mere puppets of the Soviet Union. As years went by, and the corruption only bred more contempt among the people in the South, the US became frustrated with the government it sponsored. So frustrated they did not object when the military ousted president Diem in 1963.

The US hoped a new president would step forward and form a cohesive government, but instead the military generals fought amongst each other for power and were just as bad as Diem, if not worse. The US increasingly had to prop up the government just to keep the North from invading, and the rebellious factions in the South from rising up and overthrowing the regime, possibly turning it over to communist control.

The United States continued to support the "democratic" government of the South while conducting covert strikes against the communists to the North. Eventually the communists figured out the US was behind these attacks, caught them in the act, and defended themselves. The US considered it an act of aggression.

The incident used to justify overt military action was an exaggeration and did not really involve the North Vietnamese at all: US ships off the coast of North Vietnam believed enemy vessels had intercepted them. The US ships opened fire, but by the time the smoke cleared, there was nothing there. No evidence of enemy vessels. Johnson knew this, but he began bombing anyway, hoping to subdue the enemy into negotiations and end the stalemate. Bombing the North became the primary strategy of the war right up to the early 1970's, but it failed to destroy much of value, and it did not cripple the North militarily in any way.

Both sides wanted peace, but neither wanted to compromise. The communists wanted the entire country unified under their rule, without foreigners influencing the government behind the scenes. The US and the South Vietnamese government wanted to rule the nation their way, more or less as it had been in French colonial days. Neither side trusted the other to abide by the terms of any agreement.

Thus peace stalled while bombing and fighting continued. The war consumed Johnson and was largely the reason he chose not to seek a second term. Bombing the enemy into submission did not work, soldiers on the ground could not engage the enemy in the jungles, and victories were never decisive, with neither side able to hold onto territory it acquired for very long before the other side took it back. It should have been a simple victory for the United States, and yet nothing worked.

Nixon, responding to public demand and the political climate, began to withdraw troops from combat. Peace was negotiated, but neither North Vietnam nor the South intended to honor the accord. They had been burned by peace agreements in the past, so they did not trust anyone to share power. The South could not form a cohesive government to defend itself, and now there were fewer American troops in the country, so the communists swept in and took control.

While Marx and Engels were very clear about revolution, they were very vague on what to do once communism gained power. The communists tried to reorganize society along Soviet (not Marxist) principles,

but it did not work. Allowing foreign businesses into the country was the only way to rebuild the nation and keep the people from starving. Idealism didn't win either way.

A lengthy, exhaustive, often tedious read that should have been condensed in places, this is indeed a definitive account of the conflict from a political point of view. Somebody should have stood up and said "these people are fighting for their freedom and their right for self-determination, just as America did in the past, so why not let them have it?" It's never that simple when there's money to be made.

So... the questions everyone asks: why were we there? Why did the French fight this war? Why did the United States get involved? What was it about? France fought to keep colonial relations in tact. Too many businesses had a profitable stake in the region to let it go. It was about money, as well as national pride after the Nazi occupation. The United States took over to ensure the government that came out of the war for independence was favorable to US interests. By the time it reached full-scale war, it's likely nobody remembered it that way. Perhaps the leadership of the United States believed communism was a disease that threatened to infect the world, and the Soviets would gain allies that might challenge the United States for power. In short, the US wanted the government of Vietnam to be useful for the West, while the Communists wanted autonomy.

If only someone had stopped and questioned why the "disease" of communism existed in the first place, and if the West was in fact the cause.

Jimmy says

This book is probably the essential one for any person interested in learning the history of the Vietnam War. It's a reread for me. I also recommend the PBS series that goes along with it. The saddest part is all of the missed opportunities, many that I had forgotten about.

General Giap had been embittered by the death of his young wife in a French jail along with her infant child. Her sister was guillotined in Saigon for terrorism during the war with the French.

The Cao Dai cult was founded in 1919 by Ngo Van Chieu, a mystic who claimed to commune with a spirit he called Cao Dai. It appealed to the Vietnamese taste for the supernatural. It held that the best creed ought to combine the best religious and secular beliefs: Jesus, Buddha, Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, Sun Yat-sen, among others. Its main temple was in Tayninh, north of Saigon. It had many followers.

Ho Chi Minh once said, "You fools! Don't you realize what it means if the Chinese remain? . . . The last time the Chinese came, they stayed a thousand years. The French are foreigners. They are weak. Colonialism is dying. The white man is finished in Asia. But if the Chinese stay now, they will never go. As for me, I prefer to eat French shit for five years than eat Chinese shit for the rest of my life."

On the morning of June 11, 1963, a 66 year old Buddhist monk named Quang Duc set himself on fire. He climbed out of one car in a motorcade. One monk doused him with gasoline, another lit him. Malcolm Browne, an AP photographer, was there. His photo made an immense impact in the world. In a final document, he urged President Diem in a "respectful" plea to show "charity and compassion" to all. One student said monks often burned a finger or a toe as a symbolic protest. Two other monks had volunteered but his seniority prevailed. Americans tried to get Diem to change after the immolation but to no avail. Madame Nhu called it a "barbecue" and said, "Let them burn, and we shall clap our hands."

The whole chapter on the assassination of Diem is fascinating. And hugely regrettable. Miscommunication everywhere.

Karnow claims one disservice done by the Pentagon Papers of 1971 was to convey the idea that all plans drafted by bureaucrats was official policy. There are always incredible proposals drawn up that are not even considered.

Tran Do dispelled the myth that many Westerners believed in that the Vietcong was an indigenous and autonomous insurgent movement. America was much to blame for the idea that there was some sort of headquarters for the movement.

Tri Quang was a leader of Buddhists protests. It is interesting to note that when the Communists took over in 1975, they banished him to a monastery to not have to deal with him themselves. They can get such things done without much of a peep from the rest of the world.

Funny story about a Texas clergyman who mistakenly kept referring to the South as "South Vietcong."

The Communist fighting forces had minimal needs. I can attest to the fact that it was not the same for American soldiers, much to my chagrin. The cost of providing beer, cigarettes, and other luxuries must have been enormous.

The bombing of the North appears to have heightened rather than dampened the spirit of the people of North Vietnam. Karnow speaks of a hint of "nostalgia for the war." Dealing with the reality of Communist life now without war is not as much fun.

The "John Wayne Syndrome" affected a lot of young Americans who enlisted.

War goes from horrible boredom to intense excitement. Guard duty in particular can be very boring, which leads to mistakes being made. There was almost a beauty to war. But there was nothing romantic about mines, booby traps, and mortars. Especially with no achievable goal in sight.

When the Vietcong captured Hue in the 1968 Tet offensive, they went on a merciless house to house search. About 3,000 bodies were found later: shot, clubbed to death, or buried alive. Yet these atrocities were barely noticed by the American public compared to atrocities by American soldiers. Karnow found it difficult to find any Communist who would clarify what happened in Hue. Some even denied it. Among the dead at Hue were a group of German doctors and their families who were teaching at a local medical school.

About 150 Marines were killed in the battle to retake Hue. I have a relative who was involved in that effort, and he refuses to speak about it. The Communists made a strategic mistake and did not retreat and were killed. There are those who wonder if the North Vietnamese leaders were using their members in the Vietcong as sacrificial lambs. The city had to be "destroyed in order to be saved."

Karnow found that the CIA's Phoenix program had decimated the Vietcong. It was criticized at home here as a waste of time. Many of the South Vietnamese Communists found they were treated poorly by the Northerners. I found that there was a lot of prejudice between the North and South even without the war.

Why did the Communists submit to the losses at Khesanh? Some think of it as a subterfuge to distract Westmoreland from protecting cities and to aid the Tet offensive.

It is interesting to note that Communist leaders think they miscalculated the Tet offensive. Their main objective was to spur uprisings in the South. It was a defeat, but it turned into a victory by the effect it had on American public opinion.

It is believed that some people voted for Eugene McCarthy in 1968 thinking he was the anti-Communist fanatic Joe McCarthy who died in 1957. I wonder how often that type of thing happens.

The U. S. command in Saigon estimated that 65,000 soldiers were on drugs in 1970. One official linked it to "idleness, loneliness, anxiety, and frustration." The war effort seemed useless; urban Vietnamese did not care for the behavior of American soldiers. For ten dollars you could buy a vial of pure heroin. Prepacked, prerolled marijuana cigarettes soaked in opium were available for almost nothing.

More than 200 incidents of fragging were recorded in 1970. I can attest to soldiers who claimed to having done that. What I don't know is if they were only trying to shock or were telling the truth.

On August 20, 1968, Soviet tanks invaded Alexander Dubcek's government in Czechoslovakia. Brezhnev said he would intervene in *any* Communist country where he feared change of policy. That terrified the Chinese. This was an opportunity for the US to build a relationship with China.

Vietcong motto: "When the head passes through, the tail will follow easily."

By 1972, only 6,000 of 70,000 American troops remaining in Vietnam were combat soldiers. That's an incredible ratio. Why would any of them be willing to die for a failing cause? Saigon had over a million soldiers, but they were rushed around the country and stretched thin. It was an impossible situation for those poor men.

A "leopard spot" arrangement was finally made in the peace talks, allowing Communists to hold on to territory they claimed. It was a disastrous arrangement for the South.

The damage done by Nixon's famous Christmas bombing was greatly exaggerated. American antiwar activists in Hanoi wanted the mayor to lie about casualties, but he refused to his credit.

President Thieu was forced to accept the "peace" proposal. It was certain to bring about the end.

Communist General Tran Van Tra wrote a fabulous book about leading forces in the south, but he was purged for disagreeing with the North.

Eventually Congress cut off all funding and abandoned the South. The collapse just snowballed. In Hue women swam into the ocean trying to reach fishing boats with their babies fearing another Hue massacre as in 1968. Thousands died.

Finally it would be "Big" Minh who would surrender.

Suzanne says

Substantial and erudite but splendidly and accessibly written. I was engrossed from the first page to the last. And I'm not a big of military history. Which is something I keep saying every time I review the book on

military history that I've just voluntarily read. Might be something to the apparent discrepancy.

I'm not sure when I'll give a better review of this. I just set it aside about 4 minutes ago and it ends with the communists rolling into Saigon. I cannot stop thinking about a scene from my own life that would have happened shortly after that event.

We are living in a small apartment in Michigan. My father has recently graduated from the University of Michigan Law School and my mother is learning how to be an American housewife. I am about 4 or 5 and this is one of my earliest memories. My mother is lying on the couch with an arm flung over her face and a letter crushed to her chest. She is weeping and keening like a wounded animal. Her crying is so loud it echoes. I am stunned and sit on the floor next to the couch with no idea what's happening. I ask her something. I don't remember what. "What's wrong?" or "Why are you crying?" perhaps.

Somehow she sobs out that the communists have taken her father. I didn't understand. I asked for a snack. She screamed at me. And it is many, many years before I process what any of that meant. I am still to this day unpacking what it meant to all of us across two continents and an ocean.

This was my first book in that quest. I have many thoughts about it. Many of those about the book's treatment of the Vietnamese as a people. But, they aren't clear enough to commit to writing yet.

Michael says

Fascinating, appalling, and all too relevant. Karnow begins with the earliest colonial era in Indochina, and takes you all the way up to the last helicopter leaving Saigon. Written in an engaging, polished prose that nonetheless lets some passion through as Americans again and again can't let go of illusions and walk away from a bad situation of their own making.

I learned many things I hadn't understood at all before - how deep French cultural roots ran in Viet Nam, role of Catholics, Buddhists et al, the "loss" of China as precedent, and the extreme feebleness of the various governments in the South. And most importantly how early US planners understood the war was hopeless and how difficult it was to reverse years of foreign policy posturing under the white-hot glare of domestic politics in the Cold War era.

Philip says

At around 270,000 words, Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam – A History* is something of a monster, as is its subject. Even those who did not live through the era when reports of the conflict dominated most international news, the title itself is still probably recognised as something iconic, something that sums up the third quarter of the twentieth century. The word iconic would be inaccurate, however. Icons are small images that suggest something bigger. Vietnam, as a subject, as a reality, was always a big issue. It was fought over for thirty years, toppled US Presidents, claimed untold thousands of lives and effectively involved the whole world. This was superpower conflict by proxy.

Stanley Karnow's book is replete with detail, analysis, fact, some fiction and much posturing. It benefits from being written largely from experience. The author was a respected journalist who covered the war at its

height and his encounters with political elites, combatants and victims bring the story of death and destruction to life, if that phrase is not in bad taste.

This was no minor skirmish, confined to a far corner of the North American world view. World War Two devastated Europe and significant other parts of the world. And yet a greater tonnage of explosives was dropped in the Vietnam War than in all the Second World War's theatres of conflict combined. It's worth taking a moment to reflect on that. In addition, chemical weapons, defoliants and napalm were sprayed around with apparent abandon before the United States, defeated, left for their territorially unaffected, unattacked home.

There are those who thought the war was counter-productive. There were those who still think that the war was fought by a USA that had one hand tied behind its back. An all-out onslaught would have brought decisive victory. But, given the above, what would that victory have looked like? Just how close did the world come to a second nuclear war?

Stanley Karnow reminds us how truth becomes a casualty. He describes how US officials, civilian and military alike dared not communicate negative messages or attitudes about the war. To do so was seen as defeatism and there were no promotions for defeatists, no opportunities for pessimists, their positions being interpreted as merely unpatriotic. In contrast, positive reports were rewarded, even if they bore little resemblance to reality. And the author's portrait of Walt Rostow, a prominent member of LBJ's team, casts him squarely in the role of anti-communist hawk, a guise in which we should view him when today we approach his still respected work on economic change and development.

But what is perhaps most troubling was the ease with which those in power used the mechanisms of their state to hound dissenters, to tap their phones, block their careers. And, it has to be remembered, this culture did lead – though perhaps indirectly – to the near impeachment and actual removal from office of an elected US President.

Stanley Karnow's book captures the conflict ideologically, historically and politically. Alongside Gabriel Kolko's book on the same subject, it ought to be required reading for anyone left in the world who thinks that war can solve conflict.

Chris says

I recently watched the excellent Ken Burns PBS Documentary on Vietnam and wanted to learn more about the war. This book was written by a journalist who covered Asia from 1959 thru 1974. Due to his honest, thorough reporting of the Vietnam War, he gained a place on Nixon's "Master List of Nixon's Political Opponents". He began writing this book in the 1980's and, as part of his research, interviewed many of the key players on both sides of the conflict. It's a very well written book and a great overview of the war. If you are interested in a general understanding of the conflict, especially the political decision-making that occurred, this book would be well worth considering.

Jerome says

Is this a good book? It depends on what you're looking for. This book has many merits: It is comprehensive, it attempts to explain Vietnamese history, and it is full of on the spot interviews and remembrances. This remains the basic history text of record on American involvement in Vietnam. There is a breadth of perspective here that is lacking in many accounts of this most up-close and personal of wars.

He spends more time discussing North Vietnam's "insane" economic policies and the Communist massacre of civilians at Hué in 1968 than he does any U.S. atrocities (e.g., My Lai). And I was impressed by his descriptions of bravery on both sides of the conflict. This is no mean feat for someone that was placed on Richard Nixon's "enemies list" (as Karnow was).

Despite these advantages, the book has some real limitations. The writing is pedestrian, the characterizations (if one can say that about history) tend to be thin, and Karnow fails to convey a sense of wholeness in many chapters. The book at times feels more like a collection of dispatches from a reporter in the field (which Karnow was in Vietnam) rather than the work of a historian who has integrated fact and theory based on deep understanding and research. As comprehensive as the book tries to be, Karnow's reach may have exceeded his grasp with his project.

Unfortunately, Karnow buys into Ho Chi Minh's propaganda that he led a popular "revolution" against the Japanese. In reality, the surrendering Japanese in 1945 handed over power to a variety of local groups with the goal of causing the Allies trouble. Contrary to Karnow's poor research, there was no revolution in 1945 and there was no Viet Minh "government" except on paper. The Viet Minh were so weak that they were pushed aside by the local french within a few weeks without even support from the outside.

Karnow disposes of the French war in Vietnam in around 30 pages. Following the mythology script, he focuses most of his attention on Dien Bien Phu and ignores the complexity and details of the French phase. It's a superficial account at best.

The Eisenhower and Kennedy chapters on Diem aren't all that great, either. Rather than being about Vietnam, it's more like Vietnam as seen by Washington in those years. There is no attempt at understanding the actual politics of the Diem era. The information on North Vietnam (or as Karnow strangely refers to them "the communists") is completely lacking. The internal politics of North Vietnam are ignored as much as possible.

As an example of Karnow's strange views: "In May 1959, the North Vietnamese leadership created a unit called Group 559, its task to begin enlarging the traditional communist infiltration route, the Ho Chi Minh Trail, into the south." Group 559 in reality launched an invasion of Laos putting a large part of the territory of that country under Vietnamese rule which continues on even now. Karnow's notion of a "traditional infiltration route" is completely false. North Vietnam invaded Laos to flank the border of south Vietnam and to use occupied Laos as a base for attacking Vietnam.

As the book goes on, Karnow presents the traditional mythology about peaceful neutral Cambodia. What he fails to say is that Sihanouk was a dictator who murdered his opponents and kept power by alternately allying himself with the left and the right. He also fails to mention the well-known fact that rather than being neutral, Sihanouk (and Cambodia) had signed a deal with China where their rice crop would be bought at an inflated price in exchange for opening Cambodian ports to arms shipments and allowing Vietnamese bases on Cambodian soil. The so-called "neutrality" story that Karnow repeats is nonsense.

And Karnow gets how the war ended completely wrong. The war ended because the entire North Vietnamese army launched a conventional military invasion with tanks over the border. In the end, the "invincible"

insurgency in the countryside couldn't win anything.

Other than those gripes, this a fine book if you're looking for an introduction on the war.

Derek Blanchard says

Although I only started reading this for a history project, I loved to just keep reading it even though I didn't need it anymore for the project. This book talked about how tough the Vietnam war was on soldiers and civilians. Powerful book that shows accurate descriptions with first hand accounts of what happened.

only read up to page 595

Brad says

Stanley Karnow was a journalist before and during America's war in Vietnam, so he comes at his subject with all the biases of his era, his job and his country (and admits as much in his Prologue), yet he still manages, for the most part, to present a balanced view of the history he is undertaking -- a history of Vietnam's wars rather than America's Vietnam War.

The title suggests that the book is going to be a history of Vietnam, an informative overview of its entire history. The title is misleading. Karnow has written an overview, it's true, but it is an overview of conflict. Once the minor disappointment over the focus of the book passes, however, it is easy to appreciate what Karnow has done.

I think this is a great starting point for anyone really interested in understanding how South East Asia become one of the most important moments in the history of a country so far removed from its shores. By tracing Vietnam's long history of warfare, from its attempts to dominate its Laosian and Cambodian neighbours and its prolonged attempt to hold off the influence of the menacing Chinese power to the north, to its disdain for French Colonial dominance and their ultimate war against (or use of) US Imperialism, the Vietnamese history of conflict shows us that wars, all of them, were likely inevitable, and that anyone taking the fight to them in their land was doomed to failure.

Karnow's best moments, however, are when the book leaves behind the jungles and cities and towns of South East Asia and returns to the machinations of the US politicians during the Vietnam Era. He addresses Kennedy's shortsightedness and belligerence (suggesting, to me at least, that his unsavoury role in Vietnam is one in a series of shortcomings his assassination have mystified for the public), Johnson's morass, Nixon's downright villainy and nuclear sabre rattling (which is a form of mental terrorism if there ever was one, and it was standard Nixon policy, actually called the "Madman" policy), and all the fucking about the other US players engaged in to prolong or fight or avoid or pull out of a war that should never have been engaged in but could not be avoided.

A good read. And a good start for anyone interested in understanding an important moment in time.
