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***AMERICA'S LONGEST WAR. THE UNITED STATES IN VIETNAM 1950–1975* by George C. HERRING. John Wiley & Sons, 1979**

In the 1990s we have witnessed a couple of wars fought by American soldiers that rang a bell of a certain conflict that took place in the midst of the Cold War. In the future these wars will certainly be thoroughly analysed and these analyses will, in turn, have reviews of their own. No such analysis could be complete without reference to the Vietnam War, which had major impact on American foreign policy and the way of handling military conflicts after 1975. Now after the Vietnam shame has passed and the American national pride was cured by the two already mentioned “successful” wars, in the Persian Gulf and Yugoslavia, it might be worthwhile taking a look at this quarter of a century long conflict again. A good opportunity for doing that is provided by *America's Longest War* by George C. Herring. This book is not merely a source of historical information. It is a thorough study of political decision-making and American way of thinking that constitutes a great background for analysing the more current events in recent history of the USA and how they were influenced by Vietnam.

Why did the United States make such a vast commitment in an area of so little apparent importance, one in which it had taken scant interest before? What did it attempt to do during the nearly quarter of a century of its involvement there? Why, despite the expenditure of more than \$150 billion, the application of its great technical expertise, and the employment of a huge military arsenal, 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 people accustomed to success? (cf. Herring (1979:ix))

These are the three most important questions, as stated in the *Preface* of the book, that the author tries to answer. In order to do that George C. Herring tells us the chronological story of American involvement in Vietnam from 1950 to 1975. The years 1963–1975, which are the years of the actual war, are given considerably more attention than the years 1950–1963, which, nevertheless, are pretty well covered, too.

George C. Herring concentrates on the political aspects of the Vietnam conflict. The social and military factors are being touched upon but politics occupies the main place in the book. According to the author, these were the political decisions more than anything else that resulted in such a great American involvement and such a stern fate in Vietnam. Thus, the evidence that he uses comes predominantly from the working of American government, the negotiated peace treaties and other, unofficial sources. He is not really interested in the effect of war on domestic policies, on the society. Nor is he preoccupied with military actions. He mentions certain developments in those two fields but does not develop them into separate topics.

At the time the book was published it contained evidence, taken from the body of data that became available only recently to the American public and offered a new look at the Vietnam War. It contains information that was only recently declassified and thus could provide American public with different view on the conflict. Besides, it was one of the first attempts to deal with Vietnam after several years in which American people and media preferred not to talk about it recovering from the shock that this conflict caused in America. The fact that the book was published several years later made it possible to have an objective and not emotional approach to the war.

There are five major points that the author makes, stating the reasons why the United States got involved and lost the Vietnam War and thus trying to answer the questions quoted above. These main themes appear and reappear throughout the book. The *Truman Doctrine* and the *domino theory* are, according to Herring, the most important factors in American involvement in Vietnam. The containment of communism was crucial for American Cold War policy and Indochina played a special role in Asia just as Greece did in Europe. Yet, as the author perceives it, there were other ways of resolving the situation, especially considering initial Vietnamese will to cooperate with the United States.

The second major factor considered in the book is the attempt to build a strong, democratic nation in South Vietnam and failing to do it. As Herring points out it was a lost cause from the very beginning. As soon as the United States started helping France they were perceived by the Vietnamese as another colonizer. It made future attempts to gain Vietnamese confidence so much harder. The cultural differences between the two people were much too big for them to understand each other both on civilian and military level. Herring sees the attempts to get support in building western-style democracy in a country with no such traditions as hopeless.

The next theme of the book is political instability in South Vietnam and the crucial decision to install and keep Diem as its leader that caused it. The author points out that to build a really strong nation, if indeed it was possible at all, one of the necessary conditions would be having an imaginative and selfless leader. And Diem was a narrow-minded, self-centred dictator who did not care about his

people, in fact hating large portion of them. He was the reason why no reform could succeed and he alienated almost every group of the South Vietnamese society. It led to insurgency and made any future attempts to regain political stability impossible, leaving the US no choice but to use military forces to ‘save’ South Vietnam.

Another point that Herring makes is how each President believed that he could be successful where others had failed. From Eisenhower, who took over from France and began allocating large funds in South Vietnam, through Johnson who placed more than half a million troops in Indochina, and ending with Nixon who escalated the conflict in order to win a better peace treaty, they all believed that they could achieve their goal of building a democracy, stopping the insurgency or defeating North Vietnam. Yet they all failed, I hasten to add.

Last, but not least, there was the domestic factor. Herring pays special attention to the balance between the hawks and the doves as a crucial factor that made the United States withdraw from Vietnam. 1968 was the year in which after the Tet offensive the American society’s mood changed suddenly. There were more doves than hawks from that point on. The author claims that the war could not have been won without popular support.

The book is divided into 8 chapters that go along the line of subsequent phases of the Vietnam War. Each chapter contains chronological description of American decisions and activities that made the US more involved in the conflict. It is not an insight to the Vietnam War but rather a general outline of the events. Each chapter is a closed entity, in which the author describes each phase of the American involvement in Vietnam. Each phase begins optimistically and ends with a change of leadership and circumstances for the worse. He emphasizes the similarities between each of the phases and similar thought processes of each President who had to deal with the conflict.

The author usually describes the process of decision-making and reasons for making a particular decision. Then comes its realization in practice and the impact on the people involved. Then, the reader learns the eventual backlash of the decision and eventual corrections that are made, although, as Herring sees it, in Vietnam corrections were rarely made. Finally the decision is put against a broader background of a particular phase or the whole period of the conflict.

One may say that this is a very well told systematized story that provides the reader with a clear picture of what all those years looked like. Although the evidence that the author uses is not too detailed, as he sometimes mentions certain things but does not develop them, he is, however, able to carry his point through. It is possible due to the construction of the book itself, as it does not aim at examining every aspect of the conflict in detail. The most important points are supported by substantial evidence, while other, not necessarily minor, points are only briefly mentioned. They add to the main argument but they do not get considerable attention themselves.

Each chapter ends with a sort of a summary of what happened in terms of general, political developments and their outcome. It is here that the author commits himself to evaluating the events and giving us his personal approach to what had happened. On the basis of the events that he described in the chapter he makes his argument along the lines of the five factors mentioned above. However, he does not really want to impose his views upon the reader. He presents his argument, making it coherent and supporting it with credible evidence, but he also leaves place for the reader's own views based on the presented facts. It is only in the concluding chapter that Herring presents his own views in more detail but, at the same time, he also points out to other approaches retaining his objective attitude throughout the book.

Objectivity is one of the greatest advantages of the book. One can also notice some vagueness in the book, which makes it possible for the readers to form their own opinions on the presented facts. Any scholarly work that aims at retaining objectivity must also be vague to some extent. Similarly, every document based on consensus of opinion must be vague in order to satisfy all the parties involved in its creation and to allow each side to present it as its success. That is exactly how democracy works. Not surprisingly, vagueness has already been present in the first document of the world's oldest modern democracy, the Constitution, which itself has been the result of consensus of opinion of representatives from several colonies that differed considerably from one another. *One secret of the Constitution's longevity lies in the flexible ambiguity its authors built into it* (cf. Kleparski (2000:50)), which makes it possible to interpret the Constitution according to changing circumstances. Similarly, the views on the Vietnam War have never been homogeneous and they may change with time, thus the vagueness of George C. Herring's work is one of its major assets.

The book is intended for a popular audience. Anyone can read it and gain basic knowledge about the war, developing his or her own opinion about the events. Its style is quite lively for a political history book making it not only useful but also interesting for a general reader. However, the book leaves out a big portion of material concerning the effects of the war on domestic policy and the American society. Thus, it gives only a partial picture of the situation. The fact that it was published in a series of books on American Diplomatic History gives an explanation of the story's focus. Nevertheless, *America's Longest War* is an important position in the literature on the Vietnam War and one of the most thorough and interesting analysis directed to a general reader.

References

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