

# Seven Questions on...

## The Vietnam War

Gregory A. Daddis, Pierre Asselin, Kathryn Statler, Addison Jensen, and David Prentice

**Editor's note:** "Seven Questions On..." is a new regular feature in *Passport* that will ask scholars in a particular field to respond to seven questions about their field's historiography, key publications, influences, etc. It is designed to introduce the broader SHAFR community to a variety of perspectives for a given field, as well as serving as a primer for graduate students and non-specialists. **AJ**

**1. What drew you to this field and inspired you to focus on your specific area of the history of the Vietnam War?**

**Gregory A. Daddis:** I arrived at West Point for New Cadet Basic Training in June 1985, only weeks after I graduated from high school. The most popular movie in America that spring was George P. Cosmatos's *Rambo: First Blood Part II*. I'm pretty certain it was the last movie I saw before donning cadet gray. I'm absolutely certain I didn't place the movie within its larger historical context. To a wide-eyed high-schooler like me, it was just an action flick with a muscular hero and plenty of orangeballed explosions.

Throughout my four years at West Point, however, I came to see how much of an impact the war in Vietnam had on our nation and my soon-to-be profession. It was more than just a pop culture phenomenon. A number of my instructors had served in the war and many of the academic department chairs—all full colonels—had seen combat. The superintendent, Lieut. Gen. Dave R. Palmer, had written a book on the war, *Summons of the Trumpet*, that we dutifully read in our military history courses. When I commissioned into the army upon graduation, I continued to feel the war's everexpanding ripple effects. I deployed to Desert Storm with non-commissioned officers who had served in Vietnam. I read memoirs like Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War* in professional development sessions. I studied critical works like Andrew F. Krepinevich's *The Army and Vietnam* in command and staff seminars. I taught about Vietnam back at West Point. And I watched pundits resurrect the "quagmire" of Vietnam when the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began to bog down in the early 2000s.

So, in many ways, my army service inspired me to study the American war in Vietnam. The conflict indelibly shaped the institution in which I had served for more than 25 years.

**Pierre Asselin:** In one word: *Rambo* (aka, Sylvester Stallone). I grew up in Quebec City, Canada. At the time, the city was very, very, very French-Canadian Catholic (*Québécois pure laine*, we used to say). As I recall, there was one Black kid in my grade school and one Asian kid in my high school. I knew nothing of and had no interest in the world beyond my own, including Asia. I struggled in both grade and high school owing to a combination of exceedingly average intellect and general indifference toward knowledge. The only subject matter I was decent at was History, and that was only because I excelled at memorizing material and that was the way my teachers wanted it.

One day during my first year of CEGEP, equivalent to the last year high school in the United States, my Western Civilizations teacher notified us we would each be writing a research paper on an aspect, any aspect, of violence in the history of the West. Having watched the second installment of the *Rambo* *magnus opus* the night before, I asked the teacher after class if I could write my paper on the war that provided the context for the movie, which I described to him as "the war the US fought against China" (my understanding of Asia remained limited to the point I thought all Asians were Chinese). Familiar with Stallone's body of oeuvres, my teacher caringly informed me that, to the best of his knowledge, the United States had never fought a major war in China and the conflict in question involved Vietnam. When I asked him about the difference between Vietnam and China, he—this time with a hint of exasperation—recommended that I go to the school library at once and start my research. I did as he instructed and found an illustrated history of the war that became the foundation (i.e., only source) for my paper entitled "The Vietnam War" analyzing—I use the term loosely—five types of booby traps used by the Viet Cong during the conflict. The surprisingly excellent grade I received for my paper (C+) encouraged me to major in History in college, which I had to attend because my mother would not have it otherwise.

Under the tutelage of Professor Hyunh Kim Khanh at Glendon College in Toronto, my interest in the Vietnam War became a passion and that passion became my life/career. It was Prof. Khanh who pushed me to look at the Vietnam War from a different perspective and secured funding for me to spend the summer of 1988 studying Vietnamese at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. That experience altered the course of my life. It drew me to both Hawaii, where I ended up pursuing a Ph.D. and living for twenty-five years, and Vietnam, which I visited for the first time in 1989 and became a professional and personal fixation thereafter. Even today, after all this time, I still marvel at the privilege of conducting research in Vietnam and feel so alive—as I put it to a colleague recently—doing just that. That research nurtures my passion for the war's history, which has not abated one bit since my college days.

**Kathryn Statler:** One of my best friends and fellow History majors in college wrote a paper her senior year on the 1950 "Bao Dai Solution." I thought it was such an intriguing topic. That same year a freshly minted Ph.D. from Yale, Fred Logevall, whose passion was Vietnam, arrived at U.C. Santa Barbara. I became interested in figuring out how U.S. foreign policy evolved from a tentative commitment to Bao Dai in 1950 to full scale intervention in the 1960s, and quickly realized there was no way to answer that question without doing a deep dive into French intervention in Indochina and the complicated 1950s Franco-American relationship.

**Addison Jensen:** My interest in the Vietnam War stems from a variety of sources, but I think it was primarily popular culture that led me to this field of study. As the product of two parents

who came of age in the 1960s and 1970s, I grew up listening to the music of the Vietnam era: Creedence Clearwater Revival, Bob Dylan, Peter, Paul & Mary, Buffalo Springfield, The Who, James Brown, Sam Cooke, and many others. So, I have always had a deeprooted love of the popular culture—particularly the music—of the Vietnam era. I have a clear memory of sitting in a high school English class listening to the lyrics of Buffalo Springfield's 1966 song "For What It's Worth." Our teacher had told us (erroneously, as I later found out), that the song was about the antiwar protests. The lyrics of the song stood out to me (there's battle lines being drawn/nobody's right if everybody's wrong/young people speaking their mind/getting so much resistance from behind), and I wanted to know more about this conflict that had so deeply divided the United States.

By the time I was in college, my interest in the cultural and social dimensions of the conflict had expanded well beyond the music of the era. I have always been drawn to the voices of individuals whose experiences speak in some way to the larger themes of war and society. Initially, I was interested in the stories of Vietnamese Amerasians, many of whom were adopted and brought to the United States. This was, in part, a result of my own personal experience as an adoptee. But I think I was also fascinated by the ways in which the war blurred the lines between the civilian and military spheres. That theme is one that I have carried with me into my current research on the experiences of American service members and their awareness and attitudes towards the various countercultural movements of the era.

My current research blends my passion for popular culture with my interest in both the individual experiences of American GIs (of various classes, genders, and racial/ethnic backgrounds) and the social and racial justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s. It was a chance encounter with an underground magazine known as *Grunt Free Press* that sparked my interest in this topic. As I combed through volumes of *Grunt Free Press*, it became clear to me that American GIs, particularly those stationed in the rear, were keenly aware of the momentous social and cultural changes occurring back in the United States. They were receiving news of the movements through music, television and radio shows, movies, underground magazines, and other forms of popular culture that made their way overseas to the troops stationed in Vietnam. In each of these various mediums, GIs were not only learning about stateside events, but expressing their opinions about these movements and their own attitudes towards the war. To me, this was fascinating—I wanted to learn more about the interplay between war and society, and how news from home affected service members' conceptions of military service, gender roles, and the United States itself. These questions continue to guide my research.

**David Prentice:** I wanted to better understand strategic change, particularly the shift from interventionism to retrenchment, and had settled on the origins of détente and the Nixon Doctrine. But it was too big a topic for a master's student! I benefitted from a good adviser—Chester Pach—who helped me narrow it down to Vietnamization.

I've stuck with Vietnam because the whole war is a story about choices. The more we learn and know, the harder those decisions become. Writing about Lyndon Johnson, Francis Bator well noted the president faced "no good choices"—something that can be said of every Vietnamese, French, and American leader as they confronted what to do or not do. Vietnam is a war of innumerable tragedies and dilemmas. "There's nothing worse than going back over a decision made, retracing the steps that led to it, and imagining what it'd be like if you took another turn," LBJ lamented. "It can drive you crazy." Yet, removed from the decision by time, it can also be one of the most intellectually stimulating exercises out there.

## 2. Which scholars do you see as having laid the groundwork for the study of the history of the Vietnam War?

**GAD:** My strong sense is that nearly all scholars of the American war in Vietnam would name George C. Herring as one of the principal architects of our field. His *America's Longest War*, now in its sixth edition, not only set the stage for how we think about the war, but it likely has been used in more college classrooms than any other single work. A close second would be Marilyn Young, whom I admired from the first time I read her *The Vietnam Wars* to the last time we were on a panel together before she passed away. She was a powerful voice and, like George, an incredibly generous and warmhearted human being.

I would argue, though, that with the possible exception of Bernard Fall, who was both an academic and wartime correspondent, journalists laid the field's basic foundations. David Halbertam's *The Making of a Quagmire* and *The Best and the Brightest*. Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*. Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake*. Michael Herr's *Dispatches*. Stanley Karnow's *Vietnam: A History*. These were the works that established some of the earliest critiques (and assumptions) of the American war that scholars have been wrestling with ever since.

Equally, military veterans were part of this first wave of critical writing, perhaps first and foremost Col. Harry G. Summers with his searing appraisal *On Strategy*. But others soon followed, like Phillip B. Davidson's *Vietnam at War*, Truong Nhu Tang's, *A Viet Cong Memoir*, and Bao Ninh's, *The Sorrow of War*, the latter two volumes suggesting that not just Americans had something vital to say about a long and devastating war in Southeast Asia.

**PA:** Khanh was a remarkable scholar but that was all lost on me at the time. It took me a while to start reading serious books about the conflict. I remained infatuated for the longest time by accounts of the Vietnam War written by or about Americans who fought in it. Mark Baker's *Nam* was my favorite. The first scholar I read closely and became devoted to was William Duiker. In my eyes he pioneered the study of the Vietnam War as American and Vietnamese history (one aspect of the latter, at least). George Herring, Marilyn Young, and Larry Berman are three scholars I have always held in the highest esteem. Objectively speaking, Douglas Pike must be recognized as the first serious scholar of the Vietnam War.

**KS:** For me, some of the earliest teaching and work from George Herring, David Anderson, and George McT. Kahin had a profound impact on how I viewed the origins of U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Moreover, I took Walter Capps' Vietnam War course (900+ students in Campbell Hall at U.C. Santa Barbara), which was a way for veterans to share and analyze their experiences with a wide audience and find some closure. This course also had a tremendous influence on how I began to think about the conflict. On the one hand, I wanted to understand the diplomacy and politics of U.S. intervention, and on the other hand, I also wanted to understand the war's personal impact.

**AJ:** This is a big question! The answer will largely depend on what dimension of the war you're looking to explore. But for those looking for a concise overview of the literature surrounding the conflict, I would recommend picking up a copy of John Dumbrell's book, *Rethinking the Vietnam War* (2012). The book provides both an overview of the major historiographical schools of thought, as well as a historical account of the war. I'm also certain that the other scholars who weigh in on this edition of "Seven Questions On..." will discuss many of the classic works of scholarship on the Vietnam War. So, I'd like to offer up a reading list for individuals who are interested in understanding the conflict from the ground up—from the varied perspectives of the men and women who served in the U.S. military. Of course, this list is not all-encompassing. But I think the books listed below provide a solid foundation for anyone hoping to gain an understanding of the

wartime experiences of American men and women from a variety of backgrounds.

To start with, no reading list on this subject would be complete without Christian G. Appy's *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers & Vietnam* (1993) and Kyle Longley's *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam* (2008). Both books provide excellent overviews of the American GI's experience of the Vietnam War, from enlistment to postwar life. For a better understanding of women's roles in the conflict, I recommend both Kara Dixon Vuic's *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (2010) and Heather Stur's *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* (2011). The literature on the experiences of GIs from minority backgrounds is underdeveloped and still growing. That being said, there are a number of places to begin. Wallace Terry's book, *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War, An Oral History* (1985), remains the place to begin any research on the experiences of Black Americans during the Vietnam War. I would follow that book up with James E. Westheider's *Fighting on Two Fronts: African Americans and the Vietnam War* (1997), for an overview of Black GIs' experiences of the war, and Herman Graham III's *The Brothers' Vietnam War: Black Power, Manhood, and the Military Experience* (2003) for an understanding of how gender (particularly ideas of masculinity) and Black Power influenced the wartime experiences of Black men. Scholarship on Chicanos, Latinos, and Asian Americans is much harder to come by, but chapters in Steven Rosales' book *Soldados Razos at War: Chicano Politics, Identity, and Masculinity in the U.S. Military from World War II to Vietnam* (2017) and Simeon Man's *Soldiering and Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (2018) provide insight into Chicano and Asian American experiences of the war, respectively. While many of these works are relatively new additions to the scholarship on the Vietnam War, each book is essential to developing a full understanding of the conflict as experienced by Americans of diverse backgrounds who served in the military.

**DP:** To be honest, I've never thought about the historiography systematically. So instead, I can only offer those scholars who laid the groundwork for my study of the conflict.

First and foremost was Fred Logevall and his *Choosing War*. It was the first "history" book I ever read.

As Logevall explained President Johnson's decision to escalate and Americanize the war, I knew I had found my discipline and methodology. I loved the idea of using both domestic and international sources to develop the context that framed key decisions. And of course, there was contingency. Structural forces made for hard, not impossible, choices. For a young scholar about to enter the historical profession, *Choosing War* was a powerful first read.

If Logevall was the guide, George Herring and his *America's Longest War* provided the road map. Succinct, wonderfully written, and updated often, this book is a model of good, accessible scholarship. It has been sitting by my desk (and frequently consulted) for well over a decade.

### 3. Discuss how the field has evolved to include different approaches to analyzing the history of the Vietnam War.

**GAD:** For me, the most interesting recent scholarly trajectories fall under what we might call a "war and society" approach. Christian G. Appy helped trailblaze here with *Working-Class War: American Combat Soldiers and Vietnam*, which remains a classic in highlighting the social background of those who fought. Mai Elliott arguably does something similar from the Vietnamese perspective in *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*. Meredith H. Lair's *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism and Soldiering in the Vietnam War* is an excellent example of the "war and society" genre.

A number of books over the last decade have highlighted the ways in which views of gender help us better understand the war. Heather Marie Stur's *Beyond Combat: Women and Gender in the Vietnam War Era* remains an important work, as does Kara Dixon Vuic's *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War*. Amanda Boczar's recent *An American Brothel: Sex and Diplomacy during the Vietnam War* follows suit, and I sought to contribute to this scholarship with *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines*.

Race, of course, was a critical part of the American war, as evidenced in Wallace Terry's foundational *Bloods: Black Veterans of the Vietnam War: An Oral History* and by the works of James Westheider. (*The African American Experience in Vietnam: Brothers in Arms* is one example.) Beth Bailey's forthcoming *An Army Afire: The US Army and "The Problem of Race" in the Vietnam Era* no doubt will advance these lines of inquiry in important ways.

There's also some truly interesting work being done with the intersections between diplomatic and military history. Robert K. Brigham offered us an early way forward in *Guerrilla Diplomacy: The NLF's Foreign Relations and the Viet Nam War*. More recently, Amanda Demmer looks at the ways in which these issues lasted beyond the war itself in *After Saigon's Fall: Refugees and US-Vietnamese Relations, 1975-2000*.

Finally, there are some wonderful contributions in the field of memory, as evidenced by Viet Thanh Nguyen's *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War*; and David Kieran's *Forever Vietnam: How a Divisive War Changed American Public Memory*.

**PA:** Access to archival repositories in Vietnam, limited as it remains and challenging as it can be, changed everything. The study of the Vietnam War has been revolutionized by that access. Above all, it has forced and allowed us to reconsider the roles of Hanoi and Saigon (the latter's archives were seized by Hanoi's armies in 1975 and are now accessible at National Archives Center No. 2 in Ho Chi Minh City), among other local actors, in shaping the origins, course, and outcome of the conflict. Vietnamese and their leaders on either side of the 17<sup>th</sup> parallel used to be nonfactors in histories of the war or else reduced to narrow, essentialized stereotypes (e.g., Saigon leaders as inept, Ho Chi Minh as "fake" Marxist-Leninist and sole bearer of the Vietnamese nationalist mantle, North and South Vietnam as passive victims of US imperialism, etc.). That is no longer the case today. The agency of Vietnamese actors and their complex, multifaceted nature can no longer be ignored. By the way, it is because of these circumstances that students who aspire to become serious scholars of the conflict must learn Vietnamese.

I also believe that access to Vietnamese archives has accounted for the growing number of studies engaging different Vietnamese perspectives, and the field's evolution by extension. I, Ang Cheng Guan, Lien-Hang Nguyen, and Tuong Vu used newly available materials to retell Hanoi's side of the story after the pioneering efforts of William Duiker. Seth Jacobs, Phillip Catton, Edward Miller, Jessica Chapman, and Geoff Stewart then proceeded to reassess South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem's life and legacy. Recently, Keith Taylor, George Veith, Heather Stur, Tuong Vu (again!), and a new generation of bright young scholars set out to change our views of the so-called Second (South) Vietnamese Republic under President Nguyen Van Thieu. Who knows where the next wave will take us?!

The archives of other countries, including those of the former socialist bloc, have demonstrated the reach of the Vietnam War. As those archives indicate, it was a world war of a different kind. Scholarship on the war's global dimensions and the role of other foreign actors in it specifically has contributed in no insignificant ways to the field's evolution.

**KS:** There is no way to cover all the different approaches, so instead I will cheat and list recent and relatively recent books I have read that have had a major impact on the way I think about the war. Those books include Greg Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines*, Amanda Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall: Refugees and U.S.-Vietnamese Relations, 1975-2000*, Kara Dixon Vuic, *The Girls Next Door: Bringing the Home Front to the Front Lines*, and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*, Heather Stur, *Beyond Gender: Women and Combat in the Vietnam Era*, Jessica Elkind, *Aid Under Fire: Nation Building and the Vietnam War*, Jessica Chapman, *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*, and Mark Lawrence, *Assuming the Burden, Europe and the American Commitment to War in Vietnam*.

**AJ:** I am constantly in awe of the new scholarship being produced on the Vietnam War. Over the last two decades or so, historians have increasingly adapted social and cultural approaches to the study of the conflict, and as a result, new voices are being incorporated into the narrative. While initial work on the war tended to focus on the decisions of the elite Washington politicians and military generals—new scholarship has expanded to include the perspectives of the men, women, and children who experienced the war at the ground level. The opening of previously inaccessible archives has also allowed historians to widen the lens to highlight Vietnamese voices (both Northern and Southern), and the experiences of other international actors, including the allies of both North and South Vietnam. As a result, the literature on the conflict is becoming increasingly international in scope.

Personally, I am most intrigued by the works of historians who are blending military history with social and cultural approaches to explore the experiences of American servicemen outside of combat. The combat narrative has long dominated scholarship that focuses on American GIs' experiences of the war. But books such as Meredith H. Lair's *Armed with Abundance: Consumerism & Soldiering in the Vietnam War* (2011) have broken new ground by examining military life in the rear, where most servicemen served in noncombat positions. As Lair notes in the book, at least 75% of American troops served in the rear. Yet, scholarship on the "grunts" (men who saw combat) continues to dominate the literature, while works focusing on men who served away from the "frontlines" is sparse. Lair's book brings attention to the "leisure culture" of the war, highlighting the consumerism that took place on and off military bases in Vietnam. In the years since, scholars have examined other noncombat experiences of the war, including sexual encounters between American servicemen and Vietnamese civilians (Amanda Boczar) and the importance of popular culture and the media to conceptions of gender, masculinity, and GIs' processing of the war (Amber Batura, Gregory Daddis, and Doug Bradley and Craig Werner). These are just a few examples of the ways in which the field is constantly expanding, and I'm eager to see how the body of scholarship continues to grow.

**DP:** The biggest and most important change has been the inclusion of Vietnamese voices and perspectives—the so-called Vietnamese turn. Hang Nguyen, Pierre Asselin, Tuong Vu, and others led the way with pioneering work on life and politics in the communist Democratic Republic Vietnam. The "discovery" of Le Duan has forever changed how scholars and the public approach and understand the war. Ed Miller, Sean Fear, George Veith, NuAnh Tran, and others have done similar work for the Republic of Vietnam. The marriage of Vietnamese studies and American diplomatic history is spawning fresh narratives that are richer, more complicated, and more accurate than anything we had before.

#### 4. What are some of the challenges faced by scholars working in the field?

**GAD:** Perhaps the greatest challenge has been working profitably with Vietnamese sources, especially Southern ones. For non-Vietnamese speakers like myself, I've had to rely on the generosity of translators, no one more so than Merle Pribbenow who has helped so many in return for so little.

Still, the field is getting better in this arena, advancing the works of earlier scholars like William J. Duiker, whose *The Communist Road To Power In Vietnam* remains an essential work. Scholars like Lien-Hang T. Nguyen (*Hanoi's War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam*) and Pierre Asselin (*Vietnam's American War: A History*) are helping us better understand the war from Hanoi's perspective, while others are doing the same from Saigon's vantage point. Some of the more interesting contributions here are: Brigham's *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army*; Jessica Chapman's *Cauldron of Resistance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and 1950s Southern Vietnam*; Edward Miller's *Misalliance: Ngo Dinh Diem, the United States, and the Fate of South Vietnam*; Stur's more recent *Saigon at War: South Vietnam and the Global Sixties*; and George J. Veith's *Drawn Swords in a Distant Land: South Vietnam's Shattered Dreams*.

**PA:** As I mentioned above, access to Vietnamese archives is still limited. The archives of key organs including the Party, Foreign Ministry, and Ministry of Defense remain off-limits to both foreign and Vietnamese scholars. That unfortunate situation is unlikely to change anytime soon owing to the Party's obsession with controlling the domestic narrative on the war. Also, at those repositories that are accessible, researchers remain at the mercy of "censors" who vet all archival files before they are shared. Not infrequently I have been denied more than half the files I requested at National Archives Center No. 3 in Hanoi, the repository for post-1945 Vietnamese government (Democratic Republic of Vietnam and Socialist Republic of Vietnam) documents. For the record, this is all fine by me; it is just the nature of the system in Vietnam. I used to have to spend three months in Hanoi to read files for one month: after arrival and submission of my petition to access materials, it took approximately four weeks to get permission to consult indexes and request files and then another 45 weeks for the collecting and vetting of those files. These days, I can show up Archives No. 3 in the morning and start reading that same afternoon. That is a major improvement over past practice!

Personally, as a "senior scholar" (I hate the label, but it is being applied to me), a central challenge is remaining relevant in a constantly evolving and changing field. To be perfectly honest, my biggest fear at this point is to be viewed as a "dinosaur" by younger peers, as someone whose best and most productive years are behind them but somehow chooses to hang around. That fear has propelled me to consider new and creative ways of approaching the history of the Vietnam War and, to that end, dig more frequently and deeper in Vietnamese archives (insecurity and the need to prove to myself and others that I "belong" has always been a powerful personal motivator). My scholarship has taken an unexpected but surprisingly stimulating turn as a result of all this. I recently completed a study of American visitors to North Vietnam during the war based on fantastic materials from the Hanoi archives. I am currently working on a draft article based on Ministry of Culture files that explores various forms of artistic expression effectively weaponized by Vietnamese communist authorities to win over world opinion and international support during the war. Also, in light of the latest shift in Vietnam War studies prompted by young scholars including NuAnh Tran, Sean Fear, Tuan Hoang, and Kevin Li who encourage us to take Vietnamese non/anticommunist nationalism more seriously, I decided and Cambridge University Press agreed to produce a second, more true-to-its-title edition of *Vietnam's American War*. This new edition will emphasize the civil war dynamics of the

conflict and engage more robustly noncommunist Vietnamese actors and the regime in Saigon in particular, neglected in the first.

**KS:** The first challenge is combating the perception that everything has been said about the Vietnam War. As we know, there is so much more to be learned, and I continue to expand my understanding of the war through the incredible research being produced from graduate students to emeritus professors. Learning Vietnamese for those who want to take a deep dive into the North Vietnamese, Vietcong, and South Vietnamese perspectives is another challenge. And then a final challenge is figuring out how to navigate the massive scholarship on the war.

**AJ:** I'll tackle this question from my own perspective, as someone whose research relies heavily on oral history. First, and perhaps most obviously, is the challenge of interviewing as many individuals as possible before the next generation of veterans passes. The average Vietnam veteran is now in their mid-1970s, and of course, this age group is particularly vulnerable to Covid19, making the necessity of interviewing this group even more urgent. Second, for historians like myself who are interested in the experiences of those who served in the rear, it can be difficult to find individuals who are willing to share stories of their wartime service. For years, narratives of the Vietnam War have prioritized the stories of the men who saw combat. In my research, I've found that it can be difficult to find veterans who are willing to talk about their noncombat experiences of the war—many of these men do not view their service as anything worth sharing. A “real” experience of the war, to many of these men, is synonymous with combat, death, and deprivation, so it can be challenging to get these individuals to discuss some of the seemingly mundane elements of their day-to-day lives in Vietnam. Hopefully, an increase in scholarship focusing on the noncombat experiences of the Vietnam War will encourage more of these men and women to share their stories. Finally, there are the two additional challenges faced by any historian who engages with the oral history of the Vietnam War: remaining mindful of the potentially traumatic experience of reliving the war in interviews, and the fallibility of memory.

**DP:** Access to Vietnamese archival sources can be a challenge, but my sense is this is getting better. When I started researching my book, the common attitude was “don't bother.” But, I increasingly realized that Vietnamese voices were essential to understanding how, when, and why America chose to end its war. Thanks to Sean Fear, NuAnh Tran, Tram Pham, and the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, I had the privilege of examining invaluable documents in Vietnam's National Archives Center II in Ho Chi Minh City. Yes, foreign research is more challenging than hitting the U.S. presidential libraries, but it's worth it!

**5. What are some of the significant questions in the field that you feel need to be addressed in greater detail or, alternatively, which questions need to be reconsidered by contemporary scholars?**

**GAD:** How can historians best represent what Phillip B. Davidson accurately called a “mosaic war”? How can they make generalizations about a conflict that was so multifaceted and differed from place to place and changed in character, rather significantly, over time?

Provincial studies long have been important to our field in answering such questions, beginning with Jeffrey Race's *War Comes to Long An* and continuing with Eric M. Bergerud's *The Dynamics of Defeat: The Vietnam War in Hau Nghia Province*. More recent historians are adding their voices by helping us understand the war's sometimes dizzying complexity. Among these are: *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969-1971* by Kevin M. Boylan; *To Build as Well as Destroy: American Nation Building in South Vietnam* by Andrew J. Gawthorpe; and *The*

*Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam, 1968-1975* by Martin G. Clemis.

For me, the key is embracing this complexity, avoiding searches for either blame or easy answers. As directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick tried to demonstrate in their epic ten-part documentary *The Vietnam War*, “There is no single truth in war.”

**PA:** That the Vietnam War was, fundamentally, a civil war in which the Americans, and the French before them, became involved. France-trained scholars including Christopher Goscha and François Guillemot have advanced that argument for some time, but it has fallen on deaf ears in the United States. Shawn McHale's recent *The First Vietnam War* sheds important light on the matter. I uncovered revealing documents on the topic during my last visit to Archives No. 3 (May 2022) that form the basis of an article forthcoming in *Journal of Cold War Studies*. I think we in academia have been reluctant to accept that premise because we fear it might take away from the (very popular) argument that Vietnam was a victim of US imperialism, pure and simple. To me, one does not have to nullify the other. The Vietnam War should be understood as a tragedy resulting from unfortunate decisions made by all sides, not just the one that suits our own ideological inclinations. History is never simple.

Beyond that, contemporary scholars need to reconsider the Ho-as-misunderstood-nationalist trope and do away once and for all with the premise that those who supported the various non/anticommunist regimes in Saigon were nothing but stooges of the French or Americans. We in academia in particular must distance ourselves from the war narrative that Hanoi itself fabricated and propagated during the conflict and which somehow continues to inform our thinking on and teaching of it. At a minimum, we must be more critical of and willing to reassess our perspectives on the war's key dimensions. We have collectively proven reluctant to abandon and move beyond the old, traditional consensus on the war. In my opinion, Americans in general favor accounts of the war that reinforce—as opposed to challenge—their conceptualization of it.

**KS:** Why aren't there more books and articles detailing the role Vietnamese civilian women played in the war and the impact of the war on Vietnamese women? More research on the long term political, environmental, diplomatic, military, social, and economic fallout from the Vietnam War, especially from an international perspective, also seems warranted.

**AJ:** My answer to this question will probably be easy to anticipate given my responses to the previous questions! First, while the scholarship on the wartime experiences of men and women of diverse backgrounds is continuing to expand, there is still much work to be done on the subject. The literature focusing on service members' experiences of the Vietnam War has, so far, focused overwhelmingly on white males. As a war shouldered heavily by the working-class, it is imperative that scholars work to highlight the voices of Black Americans, Hispanics and Latinos, Asian Americans, and American Indians who fought in Vietnam in numbers disproportionate to their populations. While the experiences of women who served in the war have (thanks to historians like Heather Stur and Kara Dixon Vuic), been given more attention in recent years, there is still ample room to grow, and scholarship on the service of gay men and women is nearly non-existent (though Randy Shilts and Justin David Suran provide a starting point for scholars interested in the subject). It is especially important to consider all of these experiences alongside the broader cultural landscape of the racial and social justice movements of the Vietnam era.

In a similar vein, the vast majority of work done on the military experience of the Vietnam War has focused on the “combat moment” at the expense of a far more common experience—life in the rear. This combat narrative is one that has been further

cemented by the media—including Hollywood films such as *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*, and countless others. While it is important to acknowledge the very real sacrifices made by grunts who endured the horrors of guerrilla warfare, the emphasis on stories of combat obscures the narratives of the men and women who served in the rear. Examining these experiences more closely can reveal much about the relationship between Americans and Vietnamese civilians, the blurred line between civilian and military spheres, and the evolving opinions of the U.S. role in the world.

**DP:** Obviously, we need more research on the Vietnamese side of the war, but I would add that we need more research on Laos and Cambodia as well. Both nations played key diplomatic, strategic, and political roles during the First and Second Indochina Wars. We tend to get so focused on the war in Vietnam that we forget about its other theaters or how that conflict shaped its neighbors.

**6. For someone wanting to start out in the history of the Vietnam War, what 5-8 books do you consider to be of seminal importance—either the “best” or the most influential titles?**

**GAD:** For my money, David Elliott’s *The Vietnamese War: Revolution and Social Change in the Mekong Delta, 1930-1975* remains the book to read for understanding the political and social dimensions of a long conflict involving the struggle over Vietnamese identity in the modern era. On antecedents to the American war, readers can’t do much better than *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* by Fredrik Logevall. Fred also helps us understand the American decisions for intervening in Southeast Asia in *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*.

I’d like to think my *Westmoreland’s War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam* helps us better understand the ways in which US military leaders sought to fight a complex political-military war. *Hanoi’s War* by Hang Nguyen does the same, I would argue, for the communist side.

Appreciating the American home front is critical and Penny Lewis does this well by combining issues of class, dissent, and memory in her compact *Hardhats, Hippies, and Hawks: The Vietnam Antiwar Movement as Myth and Memory*. Grasping the constructed narratives of the war also is important, arguably best explored in Tim O’Brien’s definitive *The Things They Carried*. Ocean Vuong’s beautifully written *On Earth We’re Briefly Gorgeous* showcases how such narratives (and trauma) can be passed from one generation to the next while challenging us to reconsider when wars truly end.

Finally, it’s crucial to hear the voices of those who participated in the war by reading a classic memoir, none more searing than Ron Kovic’s *Born on the Fourth of July*, Lynda Van Devanter’s *Home before Morning: The Story of an Army Nurse in Vietnam*, or Le Ly Hayslip’s *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*.

**PA:** Well, I have written three books, so that leaves only 2-5 titles. Seriously, perspective is everything to me. I am partial to titles that have offered original, creative, thought-provoking takes on the war. Works that piqued my own interest or otherwise shaped my thinking on the conflict include almost anything written by Douglas Pike and Bernard Fall; Frances Fitzgerald’s *Fire in the Lake*; Stanley Karnow’s *Vietnam: A History*; William Duiker’s *The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam*; Jeffrey Race’s *War Comes to Long An*; Guenter Lewy’s *America in Vietnam*; Nguyen Tien Hung and Jerrold Schecter’s *The Palace File*; Gabriel Kolko’s *Anatomy of a War*; Truong Nhu Tang’s *A Viet Cong Memoir*; George Kahin’s *Intervention*; Marilyn Young’s *The Vietnam Wars*; Edwin Moise’s *Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War*; David Elliott’s *The Vietnamese War*; and Carlyle Thayer’s *War by Other Means*. These are in my mind the canons of the field, critically important in influencing how entire generations of scholars have engaged the

Vietnam War.

Michael Vickery’s *Cambodia, 1975-1982* conditioned my approach to the study of the Vietnam War more than any other work. His discussion of the “standard total view” daring scholars to question even interpretations emanating from the body of widely accepted scholarship on a topic is largely the reason I have never wedded myself to a particular ideological perspective on the Vietnam War and spent the better part of my career being contrarian instead, that is, trying to find fault in the established academic consensus on that conflict. Someone once called me an “apologist a\*\*hole” for US imperialism because I argued in my second book that Hanoi had in fact started the Vietnam War. It has never been my intention to defend western imperialism or exonerate the United States for the death and destruction it caused in Vietnam and across the rest of Indochina. All I sought to do then and still aim to accomplish today is demonstrating that nothing about the Vietnam War is as easy to understand as we think.

**KS:** Well, for the critical 1950-1960 period, obviously my book, *Replacing France: The Origins of U.S. Intervention in Vietnam*, does the best job of explaining how the United States became increasingly involved in Vietnam. Of course, David Anderson’s *Trapped by Success: The Eisenhower Administration and Vietnam, 1953-1961* probably had the biggest influence on me as I wrote my book. Everyone should also read George Herring’s *America’s Longest War* for the best overview of the entire conflict. For the American soldier’s experience, I recommend Kyle Longley’s *Grunts: The American Combat Soldier in Vietnam*. For the connection between domestic politics and foreign policy in Vietnam there is nothing better than Andrew Johns’s *Vietnam’s Second Front: Domestic Politics, the Republican Party, and the War*. David Schmitz’s *Richard Nixon and the Vietnam War* forced me to reconceptualize the timing of Nixon’s decisionmaking on the war.

**AJ:** Every book that I have mentioned so far is, in my opinion, deserving of a spot on the “most influential” list of studies that focus on American military experiences of the Vietnam War. If I were to focus more broadly on the conflict as whole, I would add these books to the list:

1. For those just beginning to study the Vietnam War, George C. Herring’s *America’s Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (1979) remains an indispensable account of the war. It was used as a textbook in an undergraduate class I took on the Vietnam War, and though it is one of the older publications on this list, I think it remains a useful overview of the conflict.

2. Pierre Asselin’s book, *Vietnam’s American War: A History* (2018) offers readers a look at, in Asselin’s words, “the story of the Vietnam War from the ‘other side.’” This book is crucial for any scholar looking to balance out accounts of the war from the U.S. perspective with a work that examines the war from the vantage-point of Vietnamese communist decision-makers.

3. Two other works by Christian G. Appy deserve a spot on this list. First is *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered From All Sides* (2003), an oral history of the war that includes the voices of Vietnamese veterans (on both sides) alongside those of American veterans (of varying backgrounds). The book also includes interviews with prisoners of war, military commanders, activists, women (civilians, activists, and veterans), entertainers, politicians, and the families of veterans. For those looking to read a wide range of perspectives on the war, this book provides a solid foundation.

4. Second is Appy’s *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (2015) which provides a thought-provoking look into the realities and myths of the Vietnam War and the ways the conflict affected how Americans think of ourselves as a people and nation. Appy also draws on an impressively wide range of sources, including movies, songs, and official documents.

5. Finally, I don't think any list of books on the Vietnam War is fully complete without including the novels and autobiographical accounts of Tim O'Brien, one of the most well-known authors to come out of the Vietnam War. Any of his books, including *If I Die in A Combat Zone* (1973), *Going After Cacciato* (1978), and *The Things They Carried* (1990) is worth a read for anyone hoping to gain a better understanding of the emotional complexities of the war.

**DP:** George Herring's *America's Longest War* and Pierre Asselin's *Vietnam's American War* are fundamental starting points. Both books were born out of their authors' deep knowledge and extensive research. They are indispensable.

Second, I'd recommend three books that well explain, from the perspective of the Vietnam War, the conduct of U.S. statecraft and the role of American domestic politics. Mark Atwood Lawrence's *Assuming the Burden* captures the divisions within American officialdom on Vietnam and the dilemmas of U.S. power as that country grappled with the First Indochina War. As I've already noted, Logevall's *Choosing War* is a profile in how to think about presidential decisionmaking. And Andrew Johns's *Vietnam's Second Front* reminds us that politics is never far removed from those decisions.

Finally, I'd suggest a spate of stellar, Vietnamese-centered books. For the communist side, there is Tuong Vu's *Vietnam's Communist Revolution*, Hang Nguyen's *Hanoi's War*, and Asselin's *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*. For the other, there is NuAnh Tran's *Disunion*, Edward Miller's *Misalliance*, George Veith's *Drawn Swords*, and every article written by Sean Fear whose book cannot come soon enough.

**7. For someone wanting to teach a course on the history of the Vietnam War or add the Vietnam War to an existing course on U.S. foreign relations, what core readings and/or media would you suggest?**

**GAD:** Without question, to me, the best single volume on the diverse, and often competing, interpretations of the Vietnam War is Gary R. Hess's *Vietnam: Explaining America's Lost War*, 2nd ed. For an introduction to the field, this work is essential for understanding the key debates regarding the course and conduct of the war.

I then would recommend a primer, like Mark Atwood Lawrence's *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History* or Mark P. Bradley's *Vietnam at War*. Both are excellent, pithy overviews of the war from an international perspective and usefully place the conflict within its proper Cold War context.

Finally, I would suggest a documentary reader so students could explore some of the basic arguments of the war through primary sources. Among the best of these are: Edward Miller's *The Vietnam War: A Documentary Reader*; Michael H. Hunt's *A Vietnam War Reader: A Documentary History from American and Vietnamese Perspectives*; and Mark Atwood Lawrence's *The Vietnam War: An International History in Documents*.

**PA:** Pretty much anything by Christopher Goscha and his *The Road to Dien Bien Phu* specifically. Goscha deals mainly with the French War (1945-54), but it was in its context that the United States decided to "buy" Vietnam and the two Vietnams were created. As to more comprehensive histories suitable for classroom use, I have always liked William Turley's *The Second Indochina War* and John Prados' *History of an Unwinnable War*. George Herring's *America's Longest War* is still a remarkable book but priced unreasonably by its publisher. In my own undergraduate course on the war, I use Prados, my *Vietnam's American War* (written expressly for the classroom), Christian Appy's *Patriots*, and Edward Miller's *The Vietnam War* documentary reader. No media stand out to me. The Ken Burns series has merit, to be sure. I refuse to use

American literature (e.g., Tim O'Brien), movies, or music because they invariably reinforce the notion that the war was a purely American affair—and tragedy. American veterans and former antiwar activists are a remarkable resource, especially as many of these men and women were our students' age when they served in or protested the war. I have access in San Diego to a vast pool of officials, troops, and refugees from the old South Vietnam. Unfortunately, it is difficult to get them to agree to speak to a roomfull of American students. However, when they do, they humanize a part of the Vietnamese experience in ways no other source can.

Anyone who teaches the Vietnam War and wants to do right by their students should expose them to variegated perspectives on it, not just their own or that of their favorite author—unless I am that author!

**KS:** My course is titled "The Vietnam Wars" and I change up my readings each time I teach it. Last fall semester I assigned my book, *Replacing France: The Origins of American Intervention in Vietnam*, George Herring, *America's Longest War*, Kyle Longley, *The Morenci Marines: A Tale of Small Town America and the Vietnam War*, Andrew Johns, *The Price of Loyalty: Hubert Humphrey's Vietnam Conflict*, Greg Daddis, *Pulp Vietnam: War and Gender in Cold War Men's Adventure Magazines*, and Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War*. I usually use something by Tim O'Brien; *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is a perennial favorite. I often contrast Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* with the two film versions. For the Vietnamese perspective I still like Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Truong Nhu Tang's *A Vietcong Memoir*, Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, and Duong Thu Huong's, *Novel Without a Name*. I have assigned Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* as well. Zoom has made it very easy to invite the authors to engage students on the major themes of their books.

I prefer to show brief clips of the PBS 1983 *Vietnam: A Television History* throughout the semester to the 2017 Ken Burns/Lynn Novick documentary, *The Vietnam War*. While the Burns/Novick documentary is excellent on covering combat from all perspectives, I find it weak on diplomacy, politics, economics, civilian, social and environmental factors. I always show the 2003 documentary *The Friendship Village* featuring George Mizo and the 2014 documentary by Rory Kennedy, *Last Days in Vietnam*.

And then I start every class with a song. I always begin with "The Ballad of Ho Chi Minh" and then the "Ballad of the Green Berets." After that, a sampling of songs I play include Buffalo Springfield "For What's It's Worth," Phil Ochs, "Draft Dodger Rag," Edwin Starr, "War: What is it Good For?" Country Joe McDonald, "I Feel-Like-I'm-Fixin-to-Die Rag," CCR, "Fortunate Son," Donovan, "Universal Soldier," Bruce Springsteen "Born in the USA," and REM, "Orange Crush." The most recent song I play is "Uncommon Valor: A Vietnam Story," by Jedi Mind Tricks. The very last class, right before the holidays, I play "Happy Xmas (War is Over)," by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. For each song, we listen to the lyrics and then dissect the song, situating it within the historical context and relevant themes of the class. Students are amazed to learn what "Born in the USA," "Orange Crush," and "Happy Xmas" are actually about. At the end of the semester, I ask students to choose an additional song we have not listened to and analyze it as part of their final assignment for the class.

**AJ:** I have yet to teach a class that focuses exclusively on the Vietnam War, so I'm looking forward to reading the responses of my fellow scholars to this question! That being said, I have taught classes on U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1945, so of course, my version of this class devotes at least one week of material to the Vietnam War. During this week of the course, I have found that students particularly enjoy material that allows them to engage with the culture (songs, movies, pop cultural icons) of the 1960s

and 1970s. Not every student is familiar with the history of the Vietnam War, but if you play Creedence Clearwater Revival's 1969 hit "Fortunate Son," and ask the class how many students have heard the song before, it is likely that nearly every hand in the room will shoot up. I have found that these songs provide a great inroad for discussing the socioeconomic and generational divides that were exacerbated by the Vietnam War. The song also tends to generate a lively discussion on music as a form of protest. Full disclosure: my proclivity for using music to kick off a classroom discussion was inspired by two of my mentors, both of whom start their classes this way!

In addition to incorporating songs, films, documentaries, and other forms of popular culture into the classroom, I've also found that students are particularly interested in individual voices from the war. Of course, there are a wide variety of American memoirs and autobiographies to choose from, including the aforementioned works of Tim O'Brien and other famous veterans of the conflict. However, in recent years, I've gravitated away from these well-known voices and towards the writings of less well-known American veterans of the war. Virtual repositories such as Texas Tech University's Vietnam Center and Archive house a large collection of oral histories, and in the future, I hope to design some sort of assignment around this collection. I am well-aware that my offerings thus far have been overwhelmingly U.S.-centric, so I look forward to reading the suggestions of other scholars!

**DP:** Most of the aforementioned books are absolutely essential. As a textbook, I would recommend Herring's *America's Longest War* and/or Asselin's *Vietnam's American War*. Should Mark Atwood Lawrence revise and update his *The Vietnam War: A Concise International History*, I would recommend that. I would assign/use his *The Vietnam War: An International History in Documents*.

I would also utilize the presidential tapes as much as possible. Michael Beschloss's (for the Johnson years) and Luke Nichter/Douglas Brinkley's (for Nixon) volumes facilitate finding and locating critical and interesting recordings. From there, it's a breeze to go to the Miller Center website and download the files. There are few things as riveting as listening to presidents agonize over Vietnam.



*Passport* would like to thank out-going assistant editor  
**Brionna Mendoza** of The Ohio State University for her outstanding work on  
*Passport* over the past three-plus years and wish her well in her new career.