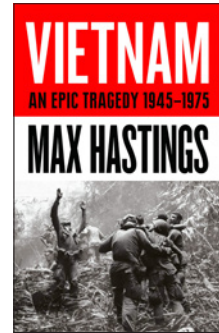


Book Review

Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975



By Max Hastings

Publisher: William Collins (20th September 2018) (ISBN-13: 978-0008132989), 752 pages

Reviewed by Group Captain Tim Below

Biography: Group Captain Tim Below is a Hercules pilot, experimental test pilot, and a strategist. A graduate of both the Royal College of Defence Studies and the USAF School of Advanced Air and Space Studies, he holds Masters degrees in Defence Studies and in the Art and Science of Airpower. He was the UK's first resident Defence Attaché to Vietnam from 2013 to 2016, and is currently serving as the Air Attaché in Paris.

Introduction

In *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy 1945-1975*, Sir Max Hastings reflects on the real-world dilemma as *Realpolitik* events unfolded in Vietnam during the 30 years following the Second World War. These eventful years saw the fall of the French colonial regime, the inexorable advance of America's foreign policy into the Indochinese mangle, the eventual withdrawal of the United States from South Vietnam (correctly the Republic of Vietnam), and the subsequent – and he postulates by then inevitable – fall of the Southern regime to the communists of the North (formally the Democratic Republic of Vietnam).

Hastings is a distinguished author, journalist, TV broadcaster, and newspaper editor who has received awards for both his journalism and his books. Vietnam was just one of 11 conflict-ridden countries to which he travelled as a reporter, visiting on numerous occasions during the war from 1970, culminating in his presence in 1975 at the fall of Da Nang and subsequently of Saigon. This book is the product of contemporary interviews with individuals from both the USA and Vietnam, who were involved in events 40 years earlier. Some are critical figures of the era; some fought in one capacity or another; and some were (mainly Vietnamese) civilians

whose lives became embroiled in what Hastings entitles an *Epic Tragedy*. By his own admission, he seeks not so much to catalogue the events of the war, but instead to characterise how it felt for those caught up in it.

Throughout this significant work, Hastings repeatedly returns to two themes. First, that far from being founded on the interests of the Vietnamese people, the American commitment to the South Vietnam regime was instead developed, executed, and adapted to serve its own domestic and foreign policy objectives even as these themselves evolved over two decades. Second, and notably from 1968 onwards, that the US leadership (particularly President Richard Nixon and his National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger) gratuitously sacrificed tens of thousands of lives on each side of the conflict by protracting the war in pursuit of 'peace with honour' – even at the height of the 'Vietnamisation' programme – while attempting to conceal the reality of an ignominious defeat from their American electorate. Indeed, perhaps because they constituted such temporally critical influences on policy formulation, Hastings focuses particular and well-presented attention on the significance of the multiple US Presidential elections held during the period.

Hastings' undercurrent throughout his book is that the South Vietnamese regime did not merit being propped up by the United States. US policy-makers regrettably failed to recognise that irrespective of who they installed to lead it, the regime had no political or societal credibility in the eyes of the indigenous Vietnamese people. Yet because he separately finds himself unable to endorse the cause of the communist regime of the North, Hastings is unavoidably drawn to the book's overall conclusion that neither societal regime represented a good national proposition. Moreover, his enduring lament is that following the Geneva accords of 1954, the Vietnamese people found themselves tragically trapped in a military confrontation between these two violently opposed, and independently oppressive ideologies, a situation which was perpetuated by the self-serving interests and actions of the United States.

Although he does not major on them, Hastings also proffers three air power lessons particularly relevant to the modern twenty-first century commander. First, that however unpalatable it may be, trying to impose a way of government on a resistant nation requires territorial occupation not the underwriting of an inadequate or incapable sovereign government. Second, the use of air power alone to break the will of a relatively simple society which is protected by capable proxy air defences represents a significant challenge in multiple dimensions. And third, that if the conditions of success are maintained only through the air power capabilities of an intervening nation, then upon withdrawal of those capabilities, the conditions for sovereign failure will inevitably recur.

Throughout his book, Hastings adopts a presentational style based on recounting human experiences through the various phases of the war. Some of his accounts appear to be slightly disjointed litanies of various individuals' fleeting recollections, and this tends to result in the reader adopting a posture of a rather dissociated voyeur. However, his excellent and detailed

exposition of other phases succeeds in drawing the reader into the world of those engaged in and/or palpably affected by the war at various critical junctures as the events unfold through the lens of their memories. His accounts of the Tonkin Gulf incident of 1964, the Tet offensive of 1968, the lesser-known battles of Daido in that same year, and the battle of An Loc in 1972, are particularly good examples. Elsewhere, Hastings touches on the My Lai massacre of 1969 and the extraordinary confrontation by the Australians at Long Tan in 1966. Yet notwithstanding that Hastings' key theme is one of flawed US policy, those more steeped in this war's history may find the scant treatment which these latter two battles receive to be somewhat surprising.

As a valuable insight from a very human perspective, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy* complements Fredrik Logevall's *Embers of War* and Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*, which address the roots of the war with America and Lieutenant Colonel John Paul Vann's contribution to that war respectively. Using abbreviations only for a small number of frequently recurring organisations and expressions, all of which are glossary-listed; signposted through a well-structured and largely chronological presentation of the major events of the war; and with a comprehensive and detailed index; this work is accessible to all, although a prior basic grasp of the war's history will enable the reader to better comprehend the insights Hastings offers through the eyes of those who endured it.

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