

interest, largely due to the authors' credentials and their "inside" work. One could say it is the latest work in the "kiss and tell" category; however, this time it's U.S. military personnel and key officials of the State Department, National Security Agency, and various intelligence organizations who are doing the telling (including former Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger).

The book makes clear that the Pentagon was not a willing handmaiden in the war against terrorism. Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs of Staff raised numerous objections to State Department and National Security Council staff pleas for retaliatory action after a terrorist bombing or kidnapping. That reluctance by the Pentagon was largely an outgrowth of inadequate intelligence, weapons better suited for a conventional European war than surgical strikes, and peace-time constraints imposed to minimize civilian casualties. These limitations when taken together eliminated chances for sure retaliation the President had promised.

Besides discussing retired Marine Oliver North's role in several operations, Martin and Walcott introduce a whole bevy of other characters central to U.S. counterterrorism efforts—far too many to mention in this review, but several having fascinating stories. Though their presentation is generally impartial, the authors subtly side with the Pentagon in the numerous disputes about whether the military or the White House was most to blame for counterterrorism foulups.

Martin and Walcott are less persuasive when they imply, though never state, that neither the failure of the Iran raid nor the destruction of the Marine barracks ought to be blamed on the Pentagon. The Marines may have been thrown into a no-win situation, but no meddling politician insisted Marine sentries not load their weapons; that was purely a Marine innovation. Nor did any bureaucrat tell the Marines to behave as though the very similar car bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, just a few months before and a few miles away, had nev-

er happened.

I suspect that many may conclude that *Best Laid Plans* is well written and well reported but stumbles on its brief, slapped-on, and vaguely worded section that begins, "How should the U.S. react to terrorism?" Such an assessment is accurate but not necessarily to the authors' detriment. The dilemma of stopping terrorism while remaining a democracy that plays by the rules has left reeling everyone who has pondered its specifics. Martin and Walcott regularly emphasize this theme, never slipping into the hype-journalism temptation of implicitly ridiculing others for failing to do what the journalist himself does not know how to do. That's to their credit, as is just about everything in this fine, timely book.

USMC

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Our 'Tumultuous Upheaval'

reviewed by LtCol Merrill L. Bartlett, USMC(Ret)

VIETNAM AT WAR: The History, 1946-1975. By LtGen Phillip B. Davidson, USA(Ret). Presido, Novato, CA, 1988, 838 pp., \$27.50. (Member \$24.75)

At first brush, this hefty volume might be mistaken for just another ponderous and hyperbolic memoir written by a senior retired officer. Don't be misled; even if you do not share Gen Davidson's views, his thoughtful and provocative conclusions will stimulate more reflection and serious thought on the Vietnam Wars (there were three of them, as he reminds us) than this reviewer (and Vietnam veteran) thought possible.

The author served as the Assistant Chief of Staff, J-2, Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), under Gens William C. Westmoreland and Creighton W. Abrams, Jr. His strategic appraisal is based on both academic research and personal observation. Unlike most historians and armchair strategists, Gen Davidson focuses his history on the architect of Communist victory, Gen Vo Nguyen Giap, the North Vietnamese Minister of De-

fense, rather than the U.S. and South Vietnamese military and civilian officials who contributed to the Communist victory by their collective muddled thinking or outright malfeasance. Through Giap's leadership in a struggle lasting more than three decades, Gen Davidson attempts to answer the question troubling most observers: Why did the U.S. win every battle but lose the war? He concludes, ominously, that in the end the politicians on Capitol Hill and in the Oval Office never accepted the fact that it wasn't our war to begin with—it was a Vietnamese conflict. Successive corrupt Saigon regimes failed to win the support of an apathetic populace, torn between a desire to see the end of foreign domination (the French) and interference (the Americans) and a return to the Confucian Order they understood.

Gen Davidson writes with a forceful and pleasing style, and in the manner of an officer practiced in getting to the heart of a matter. Readers won't find any wishy-washy academic hyperbole in these pages! Yet there are occasional lapses, characteristic of jour-

nalists and untrained historians. Perhaps most disturbing to the trained historian is his decision not to mine the rich grounds of primary sources available. For example, the massive records of COMUSMACV are now available at the Federal Records Center, Suitland, MD, to researchers persistent enough to tackle such a voluminous treasure-trove of documentation.

The author devotes the first 281 pages to the first Indochina conflict and the collapse of the French colonial "empire" in the region. Unfortunately, his introductory material to the first Indochina conflict glosses over the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party and, later, the Vietnam Doc Lap Dong Minh (Viet Minh). Davidson is at his best in analyzing strategy, such as the incisive discussion of the fall of Dien Bien Phu—the best to appear in years! Although he admires Giap, Gen Davidson criticizes him for occasional errors in judgment. The author suggests that ineptitude on the part of the French high command and its unrealized hope for U.S. intervention lay at the root of the disaster at Dien Bein Phu in 1954, more than any superlative tactical legerdemain on the part of Giap and the Viet Minh leadership.

Expectedly, Gen Davidson flays the U.S. civilians who interjected themselves into the military decisionmaking process and otherwise muddled the situation until it grew out of control. Interestingly, he points a strong finger of guilt in the right direction—President John F. Kennedy and his coterie of Eastern liberal interventionists. Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara and his inept following of systems analysts and operations researchers draw heavy fire. Davidson's pages are rich with examples of bureaucratic meddling, some of which border on the criminal. When Clark Clifford replaced McNamara as Secretary of Defense, he asked the Joint Chiefs of Staff to see their plan for victory; the courtly, patrician statesman to several chief executives was shocked to learn that there was none!

Gen Davidson wonders, as do many of us, why President Richard Nixon failed to pursue a decisive military victory in 1973 following the bombing of Hanoi and the mining of Haiphong. Those tough decisions, of course, should have been made by Presidents Kennedy and Johnson. By the time of the Nixon administration, the United States only sought a politically acceptable means of ending American involvement in the Indochina War (read "cut and run"). Finally, Gen Davidson reminds us of the obvious destructive nature of

the news media:

Grant and his subordinates were lucky. Grant would have been relieved of command had the television cameras brought the Battle of the Wilderness with its excessive casualties and horrors into northern homes every night at six o'clock, and Sheridan and Sherman would certainly have fallen prey to the liberals' charge of waging an "unjust" and "immoral" war.

Marines will find precious little about themselves in these pages. Gen Davidson writes of strategy, not tactics. The Leatherneck penchant for going after the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese, by ridding the countryside of the Viet Cong infrastructure rather than subscribing to Westmoreland's fondness for large "search and destroy" operations, escapes the author. None of the named operations in the northern provinces, such as HARVEST MOON or MEAD RIVER, receive so much as a mention. But Col Robert H. Barrow's daring foray across the border into Laos with the 9th Marines earns high marks from the author—as it should. The siege of Khe Sanh and the Tet offensive of 1968—which Gen Davidson takes pains to call by its correct name, *Tong Cong Kich, Tong Khai Nghia* (general offensive, general uprising)—concerns the Marines, of course. But senior Marine Corps commanders will likely take offense at Gen Davidson's rec-

ollections. After a visit to Khe Sanh (with Col Kenneth J. Houghton, assistant chief of staff, G-2, III MAF), Davidson returned to Saigon visibly disturbed over what he saw. The result was a hurriedly arranged conference at Headquarters, III MAF on 7 February 1968 at which Westmoreland supposedly did some "head knocking." As everyone knows, Headquarters, MACV-forward and then Headquarters, XXIV Corps appeared to take tactical control over the two northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Davidson doesn't go quite so far as to suggest that Westmoreland sought to relieve LtGen Robert B. Cushman, commanding general, III MAF, but displeasure with Marine performance is evident.

Although Gen Westmoreland provided a seal of approval to the author's historical effort, Davidson doesn't spare his former commander from criticism. Marines, especially, will be pleased to note that Davidson scores Westmoreland and his staff for foisting the concept of a "single manager for fixed-wing aviation assets" on the Corps. The tactical imperfections of the controversial edict seem not to trouble the author; instead, he chides Westmoreland for violating the principle of unity of command by interjecting a relatively minor and unimportant irritant into a complex situation requiring inter-Service cooperation.

This volume may well signal the second evolution of historical material on the Indochina conflicts. Since the Communist victory in 1975, Western audiences have been subjected to an abundance of ponderous analyses by political scientists and self-serving memoirs written by both senior civilian and military decisionmakers. Hollywood has joined the rush to market with a spate of poorly crafted and historically inaccurate movies. Gen Davidson's study, focusing on Giap and North Vietnamese leadership through the course of all three Indochina conflicts, deserves careful reading and reflection by serious students of both Asian history and the Indochina wars. Readers might not agree with Gen Davidson's conclusions—especially on how the Vietnamese Communists won the third Indochina Conflict—but his writing will stimulate a long overdue reflection on the most tumultuous upheaval of my generation.

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