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# *John Dumbrell, Rethinking the Vietnam War.*

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<sup>1</sup> Since the conclusion of the Vietnam War in the early 1970s, the USA has been involved in a number of wars and military interventions throughout the world. From the US invasion of Grenada in 1983 and the Persian Gulf War of 1991, to the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, the USA has found a variety of justifications and rationales in pursuing its national interests through the implementation of war. In spite of the frequency and impacts of US military interventions over the past half century, America's war in Vietnam remains *the war* which is imbued most with controversy, debate, and contention. Its meaning and symbolism to Americans remain manifold and its divisive qualities are still acute despite the passage of time and countless historical narratives authored about the war. John Dumbrell's volume, *Rethinking the Vietnam War*, thankfully, is not just another narrative about the war. Its structure, content, and the author's approach to the complexities of the war, make this book a valuable addition to scholarship on the Vietnam War.

<sup>2</sup> Toward the end of Dumbrell's narrative the reader encounters two telling sentences which capture an important aspect of this long drawn out conflict in Southeast Asia. "The war," states Dumbrell, "was part

revolutionary war, part a war of anti-colonial independence, part a civil conflict, part a war against communist aggression, part guerrilla war, part conventional war. Constantly shifting and changing, the war was extraordinarily difficult to understand and fix in the mind” (246). These intricate dynamics and multidimensional levels of the conflict pose an array of challenges to any author attempting to construct a coherent and relevant narrative of the war. The structure and organization of *Rethinking the Vietnam War* favorably addresses these obstacles. Quite cleverly, the author navigates between two approaches, one that is chronological, and another which is thematic. For example, the opening chapter provides not just an overall outline and historical background of the conflict, but also includes important coverage of the historiographical context which has shaped academic debate on the origins, nature, and repercussions of the Vietnam War. After providing the reader thorough historical/chronological coverage and analysis, the volume explores specific thematic dimensions. This includes addressing such topics as the antiwar movement, military aspects, and the complexities of Vietnamese revolutionary politics. Built into this combination of a chronological and thematic approach are helpful biographical sketches of key figures connected to the war. Such figures and personalities as Ngo Dinh Diem, Walt Rostow, Eugene McCarthy, Henry Kissinger, Frank Church, Tow Hayden, William Westmoreland, Ho Chi Minh and Le Duan receive special treatment throughout the book. This feature fills in particular gaps pertaining to the political landscapes of the USA, North Vietnam, and South Vietnam from the 1950s to the early 1970s.

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In addition to these strengths are other facets that assist the reader in appreciating the scope and parameters of developments part and parcel of the Vietnam War. For example, the war is framed in an international context. In particular, I cannot recall any other book of similar length providing such important input on the role of China, the Soviet Union, and the North Vietnamese government in relation to international communism. Such interpretive analyses are possible due to Dumbrell’s use of Vietnamese scholarship and an ability to weave a coherent political analysis from rather intricate aspects of international relations. What also comes across in his narrative is the impression that his analyses are balanced and based on the

persuasiveness of evidence. Consider, for example, the following statement about President Kennedy: he “was an intelligent analyst of the complexities of Vietnam, but was not entirely immune to wishful thinking” (41). Or, after several pages of careful analysis of the Johnson administration, Dumbrell weighs the orthodox and revisionist readings and concludes that “Johnson led the US (and other affected countries) into a disaster that was in large part of his own making” (74). And finally, coverage of the Nixon-Kissinger approach to the war is explained as an effort “to rescue something positive from the difficult Vietnam inheritance from LBJ...[by] prolong[ing] the misery and follow[ing] a policy which involved placing the lives of many people hostage to the quirks of erratic personality” (131).

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While Dumbrell’s analyses may be balanced, his narrative should not be construed as lacking an interpretive angle. He clearly aligns himself with the orthodox school of interpretation and questions those policies and practices that deepened America’s commitment to a military solution of the conflict. Simultaneously, however, he is critical of certain orthodox positions and does seriously consider a number of revisionist arguments. Ultimately, Dumbrell rightly concludes that from the American standpoint, the war was unnecessary and was “waged as part of a misconceived effort to force distant people to be free” (248). While drawing such conclusions is important, this volume’s true strengths can be found in the methodological approach, writing style, and structure deployed by its author. One of the dangers for any author of a book on the Vietnam War is getting “lost” in its complexities—the writer’s version of the actual quagmire that came to be known as the Vietnam War. John Dumbrell’s pivotal volume on the war, it should be noted, does not fall into this trap.

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