

MARTIN G. CLEMIS

*The Control War: The Struggle for South Vietnam, 1968–1975.*

Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2018. 392 pages.

There is a burgeoning literature on the latter stages of the Vietnam War, and Martin G. Clemis has written a useful addition to those works. His book focuses on the ways in which the combatants contested control over the population of rural South Vietnam as a means of both marshaling resources and reifying their competing visions for the future of Vietnam.

The book makes three central claims. The first is that we can better understand the war if we focus on “the production and control of politico-military space—that is, physical and ideational spheres of influence that were used to build and consolidate political and military power” (9). The second claim is that “control of the civilian environment” was much more important than “winning hearts and minds.” It was “dominion over territory and population—not popular support or political legitimacy—that shaped the trajectory of the war and led to the collapse” of South Vietnam (25). Thirdly, the book argues that revisionists who claim that the United States had “won” the guerrilla war by the early 1970s are “simply wrong,” as evidenced by the persistent strength of the revolutionary forces in South Vietnam and the weakness of the regime’s position (301).

To support these claims, the book proceeds in two halves. The first provides a thematic discussion of allied and communist attempts to control and organize space in South Vietnam. The second half provides

a narrative of “the control war” between the Tét Offensive of 1968 and the end of the war in 1975.

Clemis marshals an impressive amount of evidence to provide a useful overview of his topic, especially on the communist side. The thematic approach of the first half of the book is especially productive. Clemis should be praised in particular for throwing down the gauntlet to revisionists, whose claims about the strength of the US and South Vietnamese position in the latter part of the war look ever-more inaccurate in the light of detailed empirical studies of this kind.

The other two central claims of the book are also likely to spark further debate. Clemis’s focus on the “spatial” aspect of the war is interesting, but the reader is left wishing for a fuller development of this novel conceptual approach. The book promises to adopt “a hybrid approach that integrates the methods and insights from a number of disciplines, including military history, diplomatic history, environmental history, and political geography” (22). But apart from in the introduction, references to the methods and insights of the latter two disciplines are sparse, and the book proceeds as a diplomatic and military history grounded in traditional sources. For instance, while the introduction provides a brief discussion of the ways in which territorial space can be imbued with ideological meaning, this explanatory thread is not really woven into the book’s main narrative. Rather than exploring the content of the ideological meaning with which both combatants imbued the territory they controlled—something which would have required a much deeper reading of Vietnamese sources—the book’s main focus is on how both sides attempted to marshal resources, human and otherwise, for their war effort. Beyond the insight that wars unfold over space and that irregular warfare in particular requires the management of resources spread across highly segmented space, the added value of the “spatial” heuristic to our understanding of the Vietnam War is hence not fully established.

The book could also have done more to develop its claim that popular support was ultimately unimportant compared to the physical control of the population by the combatants. The author acknowledges that both sides considered it indispensable to their long-term objectives to be seen as legitimate rulers in the eyes of the South Vietnamese population but

stresses that in the short-term this goal was subordinated to “establishing political order and/or military control” (298). While this analysis does indeed guard against the creation of a stark “false dichotomy that casts political legitimacy and political control as mutually exclusive phenomena” (23), it still seems to go too far in separating legitimacy and control over the short term. As the book also documents, both combatant sides in the war required the South Vietnamese population to serve them in many roles—as soldiers, taxpayers, spies, and governors—in order to support the war effort. It strains credulity to suggest that their feelings about the legitimacy of both sides had no effect on the efficiency and vigor with which they performed these duties. Such an analysis also tends to obscure the important historical fact that for much of the war it was the antigovernment forces who found it easier to recruit, motivate, and inspire their personnel. Legitimacy and popular support are hard variables to measure, especially without extensive Vietnamese sources, but this does not justify us following in the footsteps of frustrated US bureaucrats and dismissing their importance altogether.

The lack of focus on the actual content of the competing visions of nation building at issue in the conflict leads Clemis to suggest a moral and practical equivalence between the policies of both sides, who he writes “wanted the same thing: a peaceful, unified, independent, and modern state” (130). Such an analysis obscures the very stark divergence in their ideas of how to achieve this overarching goal. At another point the author writes that “[t]he revolution that was espoused by the RVN and the United States was no less radical or transformative than that of its adversary” (115). This is true insofar as one can find in the archive documents in which the allies espoused such transformative goals, but it is a poor guide if our purpose is to understand their actual actions, which were often highly conservative. This suggestion of equivalence even leads Clemis to suggest that we trace the abolition of landlordism and other facets of traditional southern Vietnamese rural society to the impersonal “ravages of combat and . . . corrosive effects of war” rather than “the tenets and methods of utopian revolution” (129). Yet this rather elides the point that the war was being fought precisely because one side wanted to abolish the landlords and one side did not, at least until it was already too late to save them.

Overall, Clemis has written a valuable work that is sure to spark much productive debate. That the post-Tết period of the war is now the subject of serious and substantive historical debate rather than the plaything of revisionists is thanks to the work of scholars such as Clemis, and readers will be grateful for his efforts.

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