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H-Diplo Review Essay 403- "Vietnamization"

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David L. Anderson. *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020. 172pp. \$40 (cloth). ISBN 978-1-5381-2936-4.

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Review by Andrew Gawthorpe, Leiden University

Given the collapse of the American-backed regime in Kabul in the summer of 2021, David Anderson's retrospective on the "Vietnamization" of the war in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s could

hardly be more timely.^[1] Anderson not only provides the first single-volume account of Vietnamization, but places it in the context of subsequent American counterinsurgency efforts, including in Afghanistan. He also includes a chapter based on his own experiences in attempting to implement Vietnamization as a sergeant working in Army communications.

Vietnamization, of course, is not synonymous with counterinsurgency, or the term which was used for it during the Vietnam War – 'pacification.' Vietnamization denoted the policy whereby the United States attempted to turn over its part in militarily fighting the Vietnamese Communist movement over to the South Vietnamese regime in Saigon. The term was on one hand misleading, insofar as the war had been Vietnamized for a long time, with the South's army (Army of the Republic of Vietnam, or

ARVN), taking heavy casualties in the process.^[2] On the other hand, it was highly significant and fraught with risk, given the very substantial combat capabilities which the United States had deployed to Vietnam precisely because the ARVN had seemed on the brink of collapse in 1965. Ensuring that ARVN would be able to defend South Vietnam absent the presence of American troops, which the Nixon administration began to withdraw in 1969, was the purpose of Vietnamization.

One of the strengths of Anderson's book is that it focuses not just on the generation of ARVN's raw combat power, but also combat support services. Modern military operations require the mastery of a number of highly technical domains such as communications, logistics and maintenance. As Anderson points out, the ARVN could not defend South Vietnam if it did not have "effective combat support and services to use the modern military technology that the United States could provide" (ix). In turn, these services required well-educated and well-trained personnel, which the South Vietnamese educational system and civilian economy, which had been crushed by a draft which had potential engineers and mathematicians instead manning pillboxes, could not provide.

Anderson's personal experiences in combat support are related in chapter five, and they provide one of the most interesting parts of the book. He worked as the sergeant in charge of a quality assurance team dealing with communications support to units in I Corps, the far northern area of South Vietnam adjacent to the demilitarized zone. This was, Anderson says, a "daunting task for well-educated and thoroughly trained signal soldiers," and it was estimated that it would take eight years before the South Vietnamese would be ready to assume control of the station themselves (63, 69). This was in 1970, just a few years before the American withdrawal was completed.

Anderson identifies South Vietnam's lack of preparedness as the reason for the ultimate failure of Vietnamization. This failure was amply demonstrated in a number of engagements in the early 1970s, from the incursions into Cambodia and Laos to the ultimate collapse of the country in 1975. South Vietnam, Anderson argues, was not able to overcome its "inadequate native social, economic, and educational base left from years of colonial damage" (106). He also points to what he calls "South Vietnam's military leadership deficit," comparing ARVN leaders unfavorably to Communist military leaders such as Vo Nguyen Giap (116 - 23). The South Vietnamese armed forces, he argues, lacked the competence to carry out the sort of staff work which is needed to plan and conduct complex military operations - and they were still too reliant on the Americans to do it for them. Staff work was another behind-the-scenes activity, like combat support, which the South Vietnamese military simply could not master in time - and, given the weaknesses of the Saigon regime, perhaps never would.

Anderson does not shrink from drawing the larger conclusion from all of this, which is that "[s]trategic choices were not the problem in Vietnam" (137). In other words, there was no magical "road not taken" which the U.S. could have driven down to victory if only it had made different decisions.^[3] Thinking this way "reflects an overinflated faith in American power and rectitude that the nation is so strong and correct that Americans can only defeat themselves" (107). In fact, the conclusion that we should draw from Vietnamization is that military power has a limited utility in altering the politics of a foreign nation.

The conclusion of the war in Afghanistan is indeed an appropriate time to be meditating on this lesson. Vietnamization is often deployed in policy debates as an example of what the United States can achieve when training foreign militaries, but Anderson underscores how limited those achievements actually were. It is hence another nail in the coffin of the revisionist argument that the Vietnam War would have been won if only America had stuck around for another few years.^[4] The problems, Anderson shows, went much deeper - and were likely insoluble.

Andrew J. Gawthorpe is a Lecturer at the Institute for History at Leiden University. He is the author of *To Build as well as Destroy: The American Experience of Nation-Building in South Vietnam* (Cornell University Press, 2018).

Notes

^[1] For a discussion of how the United States failed in Afghanistan, see Craig Whitlock and the

Washington Post, *The Afghanistan Papers: A Secret History of the War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2021).

[2]

— On ARVN, see Robert K. Brigham, *ARVN: Life and Death in the South Vietnamese Army* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006); Andrew Wiest, *Vietnam's Forgotten Army: Heroism and Betrayal in the ARVN* (New York: NYU Press, 2007); Nathalie Huynh Chau Nguyen, *South Vietnamese Soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and After* (New York: Praeger, 2016).

[3]

— For the contrary claim, see Max Boot, *The Road not Taken: Edward Lansdale and the American Tragedy in Vietnam* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 2018).

[4]

— Andrew J. Gawthorpe, *To Build as well as Destroy: The American Experience of Nation-Building in South Vietnam* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018); Kevin Boylan, *Losing Binh Dinh: The Failure of Pacification and Vietnamization, 1969 – 1971* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2016); Robert Thompson, *Clear, Hold and Destroy: Pacification in Phu Yen and the American War in Vietnam* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2021); Gregory Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).