

The Perfect War: Technowar in Vietnam (The War We Couldn't Lose and How We We Did) [paperback subtitle]
By James William Gibson
Atlantic Monthly Press/Vintage Books, 523 pp., \$12.95

A Death in November: America in Vietnam, 1963
By Ellen J. Hammer
E.P. Dutton Company/ Oxford University Press (paperback), 373 pp., \$22.50

The Path to Vietnam: Origins of the American Commitment to Southeast Asia
By Andrew J. Rotter
Cornell University Press, 278 pp., \$29.95

By Marvin E. Gettleman

IN SEVERAL SENSES THE VIETNAM WAR is still being waged. In Indochina itself, a power struggle rages over Kampuchea. Reaganites try to find places, like Central America, to avenge the defeat inflicted on American forces in Vietnam 15 years ago. The battle of books also continues, as these three recent volumes demonstrate. One is a right-wing account, fully in accord with Jeane Kirkpatrick's defense of dictators, another—by far the best of the lot—is an exploration from a left perspective. But the one I will start off with is an academic study that occupies some awkward middle ground in the political spectrum.

Andrew Rotter's *The Path to Vietnam*, originally a Stanford Ph.D. thesis, attempts to illuminate the beginnings of the post-World War II Indochina struggle in the fateful Truman administration decisions to back Gaullist France in an attempt to reassume imperial control in French Indochina.

Rotter views the recolonization decisions almost exclusively from Washington's perspective. While certainly an actor in post-war power politics, the Truman administration shared the stage with other protagonists who are unmentioned or inadequately discussed in Rotter's account.

Invisible Vietnamese: We shouldn't blame him overly much for not dealing with the Russians, but Stalin after all was at the Potsdam Conference, and there is no record of the leader of the first socialist society raising the slightest objection to the dismembering in 1945 of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (arguably, the world's second socialist society), a development that set the stage for the French takeover.

But the Vietnamese, too, are invisible in *The Path to Vietnam*. Besides giving insufficient recognition to the fact that it was their country, Rotter fails to give adequate attention to Ho Chi Minh's efforts to obtain recognition from the Truman administration, attempts that were ignored much as Ho's 1919 appeals to the Wilson administration had been. Still, given the norms of current

How Vietnam succumbed to the Washington syndrome

mainstream scholarship, and its fanatical devotion to multi-archival diplomatic research, Rotter's failure to use French sources is astounding. He does use a few tidbits from the British archives; but surely in a book devoted to finding out why the Americans came to the aid of the French, we should expect the perspective of Quai d'Orsay.

Rotter seems to have succumbed to an occupational disease of researchers by unconsciously adopting the value system and priorities inscribed in his sources. He blandly passes on the views that post-World War II conflicts in Indochina reveal the Chinese "agenda...of expansion," and the effectiveness of bold Soviet Cold War initiatives.

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No doubt it would be awkward to preface discussion of each document unearthed from the Acheson Papers in Independence, Mo., with the disclaimer "U.S. policymakers believed that...." But without some such device, and without serious attention to the myths and misconceptions that accompanied Washington's decisions, Rotter becomes in effect an advocate of the very views he is trying to analyze and criticize. *The Path to Vietnam* fails to illuminate U.S. diplomacy, French statecraft or the Vietnamese society on which both acted so destructively.

An old hand: Ellen Hammer's *A Death in November* is equally disappointing, but for different reasons. An old Indochina hand, author of the 1954 classic, *The Struggle for Indochina*, she has now produced a soft-focus exercise in nostalgia and innuendo, the political message of which seems to be a retroactive application of the Kirkpatrick doctrine—stick with the dictators we've got, because if you help topple them, the Commies will take over.

Hammer's new book concentrates on the Ngo Dinh Diem era, which came to an end with Diem's "death [by assassination] in November," 1963. She disarmingly recognizes the well-known flaws of the Diemist dynasty: its favoritism to an elite of largely Roman Catholic supporters, its tendency to favor landlords over peasants and to repress former Viet-minh supporters, coupled with inept attempts to enforce authoritarian rule. When Diem and his sinister brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu (head of the U.S.-trained secret police) began using force to hold down the majority Buddhists, the regime's fate was sealed.

Hammer knows this story better than most; she even concedes that

any hope for an American-backed independent regime in Vietnam was a self-contradictory "mirage," yet seems incapable of disentangling herself from that very illusion. Her thesis is that, for all his shortcomings, Diem and his "first Republic" were the last, best U.S. hope. Diem seemed the perfect embodiment of what the Americans wanted not only in Vietnam but elsewhere in the former colonial world as well: a "third force," neither tainted by prior collaboration with imperialism nor associated with Communism.

Hammer, an unreconstructed Diemist, cannot explain why Diem became a liability in the minds of Kennedy-era war managers, and her explanation degenerates into mere diatribes against journalists whom she believes exaggerated the significance of protests against the Diem administration (especially the self-immolations of Buddhist monks), and against Henry Cabot Lodge, the U.S. ambassador in 1963, who gave the green light to anti-Diem conspirators. Hammer never subjects the various American ideological rationales for intervention in Vietnam (including the "third force" notion) to critical scrutiny.

The perfect war: James William Gibson, however, does this brilliantly in his ironically titled book, *The Perfect War*. On the question of the Diem era, Gibson lays bare that regime's underlying political economy, and how it and its largely Roman Catholic supporters virtually made war on the country people of Vietnam. When this split between the regime and the people openly surfaced in the first Buddhist crisis of 1963 (there was to be another three years later), the "need" to remove Diem made perfect sense to U.S. policymakers in search of a "perfect war" that could be publicly justified as being mounted in behalf of justice, land

reform and democracy in Vietnam.

But Gibson does not merely describe the U.S. rationales for the Vietnam War in its evolving stages—counterinsurgency, pacification, the air war and "Vietnamization" (building up ARVN)—he "deconstructs" them in a creative demonstration of the political uses of the sometimes esoteric and apolitical techniques of literary analysis. Despite excessive length and a few nagging factual errors (uncorrected in the paperback edition), *The Perfect War*, in this reviewer's opinion, ranks with some of the best American writing on Vietnam, including Jonathan Schell's early reportage, now gathered into *The Real War* (1987), and Neil Sheehan's *Bright Shining Lie* (1988).

Gibson's answer to the question of What Happened in Vietnam is an immensely improved version of the conflict-of-cultures theory that informed Frances Fitzgerald's 1972 *Fire in the Lake*.

Gibson reads the war as a text, an Orwellian communications system in which the enemy had to be envisioned as both an exotic "foreign Other" and also as an analogue of "us," subject to the same pressures for consumer goods, getting ahead, etc., that presumably animate the typical Yankee.

In such a system the Vietnamese would be thought susceptible to the punishing pressures of technologically sophisticated war-making that would, if directed against them, presumably make suburban Americans say "uncle." And when the Vietnamese patriots refused to give up, the Americans had few alternatives other than to turn up the military pressure; technowar began to take on a life of its own.

The ultimate datum: In their headlong pursuit of military victory, Washington war managers lost sight of Vietnamese civil society. So while

Americans enjoyed an overwhelming technological advantage, they could not overcome the revolutionary nationalists of Vietnam, who had fought successive phases of Japanese and French domination. Although Gibson recognizes that this Vietnamese determination, which U.S. technowar managers were unable to grasp, was the ultimate datum in the outcome of the war, his focus on American illusions precludes full attention to the Vietnamese side of the conflict. Therefore, his work has to be supplemented by the one major American study of the Vietnam War that never loses sight of the Vietnamese side—Gabriel Kolko's *Anatomy of a War* (1985).

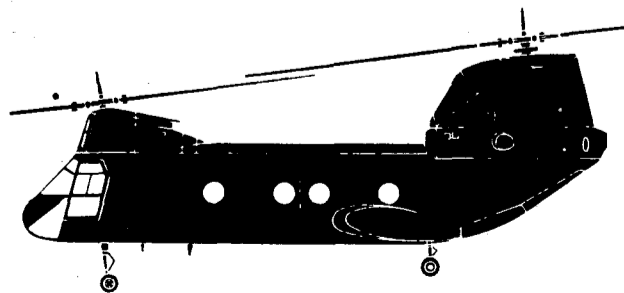
But what Gibson does perhaps better than anyone is to read the nuances of American war rationalizations. He also skillfully shows how opposition to the "technowar" strategy developed among American troops in the field and at the airbases from which strikes against both northern and southern Vietnam were launched. He reconciles two hitherto disparate bodies of American war literature, the strategic theories of the generals and the war managers, on the one hand, and the memoirs of the "grunts," on the other.

Ordinary soldiers, well aware that most combat actions were initiated by those designated as "the enemy," resented being used as bait in "search and destroy" missions designed to inflate "body counts," which would result in promotions for the officers. Pilots had similar complaints about boosting "sortie rates" that put them at increasing risk, with dubious military advantage. Gibson shows how the war against the Vietnamese was mirrored by a related struggle within the U.S. armed forces. Eventually, the ordinary U.S. soldiers arrived at their own assessments and were often able to impose their own battlefield rules on commanders. This was the process called in the field "working it out," perceived by American military brass not inaccurately as a "collapse of discipline."

The work of Gibson, Schell, Kolko, Sheehan and others makes it now impossible to uphold what used to be the conventional idea that Vietnam was a "quagmire" into which the U.S. was somehow unwittingly enticed. The far more accurate view was that Vietnam itself fell victim to the "Washington syndrome"—an ethnocentric certainty that America could never lose a war, naive faith in technological fixes, systematic underestimation of Third World revolutionaries: the ideological by-products of a world empire in unacknowledged decline. ■

Marvin E. Gettleman is author of the '60s historical anthology *Vietnam: History, Documents and Opinions*, which was updated in 1985 (with Marilyn Young, Jane and Bruce Franklin) as *Vietnam & America* (Grove Press).

What James William Gibson does better than anyone is to "read" the nuances of American war rationalizations.



Political Passages

Edited by John H. Bunzel
Free Press, 354 pp., \$21.95

By James North

THE 12 CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS collection hope to see it as a successor to *The God That Failed*, the 1949 anthology in which prominent ex-Communists explained why they joined or supported and then left the party. These 12 belonged to or hovered near the New Left; this book is their public self-flagellation.

Differences between the two collections are immediately apparent. The contributors to *The God That Failed* included some of the leading writers of the time: Arthur Koestler, Ignazio Silone, Richard Wright, Andre Gide. This time around, the contributors are somewhat less exalted. They are people like David Horowitz and Peter Collier, the former *Ramparts* editors who now write biographies of the rich and famous; Jeffrey Herf, who teaches in the Strategy Department of the Naval War College; Ronald Radosh, a history professor at Queensborough Community College.

These people are hardly in the same league with someone like Arthur Koestler. But some of them do remind me of one of his most brilliant creations: N. Rubashov, the old Bolshevik in *Darkness at Noon*, who is arrested during Stalin's purges in the '30s. Rubashov, while imprisoned, agrees for a complex mixture of motives to sign a self-abasing, dishonest confession, in which he says that during the decades in which he seemed to be functioning as one of the revolution's major leaders, he was actually a spy in the pay of fascism.

Memory lapses? David Horowitz is particularly reminiscent of Rubashov. His abject confession, in the form of an open letter to a lifelong friend who remains on the left, is subtitled: "On Being Totalitarian in America." He continues in that same frenzied spirit; he reproaches this friend for "Orwellian deceit," for "totalitarian faith," and he remarks that "...liberation theology is a Satanic creed." The New Left's greatest crime, one it shared with the Old Left, was "the denial of flesh and blood human beings for an idea of humanity that is more important than humanity itself." In the end, he writes "Our progressive mission had been destructive to others and, finally, destructive to us. It had imbued us with the greatest racism of all—a racism that was universal, never allowing us to see people as they really were, but only as our prejudices required."

Actually, I do not remember Horowitz like this at all. (I have never met him—or any of the other contributors.) I remember *Ramparts* as an exuberant and occasionally excessive but basically truthful and courageous voice in a long and honorable American tradition of muck-raking journalism. I remember Horowitz

articles as being especially good. His work was passionately leftist, but always fair, independent and non-dogmatic, whether he was writing about corporations and the Cold War or the connections between higher education and the welfare state. In particular, I remember a beautiful and powerful piece in which he linked his own Jewishness to his ambivalence about the Middle East; he included a powerful argument for the rights of the Palestinian people that did not descend into irrational Israel-bashing.

Why, then, does he misrepresent and denigrate his own past? In part, as he explains, he suffers guilt. A friend of his, Betty Van Patter, who audited the books of a Black Panther community project with which they were both involved, was found murdered, apparently because she had uncovered links to drug-selling and extortion. But he does not sufficiently explain why this tragedy, painful as it must have been, should have led him to support the Nicaraguan contras and to vote for Ronald Reagan. Col. Enrique Bermudez, the ex-Somocista who is the de facto contra leader, is the moral equivalent of whoever murdered Betty Van Patter, a thug masquerading as a "freedom fighter." If Van Patter's death had spurred Horowitz toward pacifism, or caused him to withdraw from politics, it would be more understandable.

Turning to Ronald Radosh, we move from real tragedy to farce. His self-abasement seems to have a much more mundane reason: he wants to be noticed and promoted. His autobiographical piece includes little of political substance, and much irritating personal whining; it sounds like a Classics Comic Book version of genuine disillusionment.

It seems clear that he desperately wants to catapult himself out of Queensborough Community College, and he will apparently try anything. In 1983 a book he co-authored on the Rosenberg spy trial was about

to appear ("to rave reviews," he modestly lets us know). He asked Michael Harrington for help. He writes: "Harrington, who had promised to write a blurb for my book, was told by his comrades that he

could not do so." If Radosh really believes this of one of the most honest and honored men on the American left, he is a fool. If he doesn't, he is a liar.

Overlooked overseas: Many of the contributors to *Political Passages* say they dropped out of the left due to events overseas; they most frequently cite the postwar history of Vietnam and Cambodia and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. Their anguish about the world is selective; the index contains five references to Cambodia but none to Chile, where Gen. Augusto Pinochet is continuing in power, 15 years after the U.S.-supported coup.

None of the 12 seems to have had any real experience in the Third World. (Radosh, who does occasional "reports" on Nicaragua, has not even bothered to learn fluent Spanish; he must read the minds of Nicaraguans to learn how they feel about the Sandinista government.) My own rather more extensive sojourns in the Third World—half of my life over the past 15 years—have certainly given me second thoughts about my actions in the '60s and early '70s. In particular, I wish I had been more active in the movement against the war in Southeast Asia.

My work in a score of countries on three continents in various states of upheaval has taught me that revolutionary war, like all war, is horrible by its very nature. But it is also horrible because it can lead to the kind of brutalization that William Shawcross, who has written with such feeling about Cambodia, says contributed to the rise of the murderous Khmer Rouge there. War also leads to the concentration of power that

contributes to the less serious but still inexcusable imprisonments without trial and other human rights violations in postwar Vietnam. But if the U.S. had not blocked the peaceful reunification of Vietnam in 1956, under elections in which Dwight Eisenhower said Ho Chi Minh would have won 80 percent of the vote, it would be a very different country today. If Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger had not expanded the war into Cambodia, that country would not have lived through its holocaust.

Some of our Rubashovs are guilty of the very sin they impute to the New Left: seeing people as abstractions, as embodiments of an idea, instead of as human beings. Collier and Horowitz do not really seem to respond to Afghans as people; people like them may sneer at those who volunteer to pick coffee in Nicaragua, but they did not drop their research into *The Kennedys* when the Soviets invaded. To them, Afghans are a weapon, an abstract argument to use against their erstwhile allies. (By contrast, the left-wing French

Political Passages is a largely tedious orgy of self-flagellation perpetrated by a dozen former "New Lefties" who swung to the right on Reagan's pendulum.



Risks of passing on the right

writer Gerard Chaliand actually went to Afghanistan to report on the Soviet invasion.)

There are two essays here that are genuinely worthwhile. The black writer and teacher Julius Lester describes his journey from fiery SNCC activist in the '60s to the Jewish convert and skeptic about the limits of politics that he is today. Instead of trying to score cheap points he is honest—painfully so—and his essay is reflective and humane. And Michael Novak, with warmth, without recrimination, writes about his fascinating intellectual odyssey from Catholic seminarian to radical-liberal to his present views, which he describes as neo-liberal, or democratic capitalist.

But even these two contributions have a sense of time warp, as if the '60s were just yesterday and the last eight years had never happened. Many of these essays sound as if the Weathermen were in the streets, the major threat to the Republic.

Horowitz et al. are constantly telling us how they feel more "American" after their conversions. But they have not really been paying attention to the terrible effects of the Reagan years in our country—to the crisis in affordable housing that has thrown thousands of our people into the streets, to the corporations grown so powerful and arrogant that they cut corners on health and safety and balk at giving a mere 60 days notice to workers who have given them decades of loyal service, to a swollen defense establishment that spends billions including, apparently, outright bribes, to make weapons that don't even work.

Many on the left have adjusted to the changing times. You could put together an interesting collection of essays by them. The contributors would include: the editors of this newspaper, who have kept an independent, democratic socialist voice going in print for more than a decade, with reason and humor; Bobby Rush, the former chairman of the Illinois Black Panther Party, who is today a respected Chicago alderman and a leader in the city's grass-roots reform movement; David Bruck, an antiwar activist, now a lawyer, who defends poor people in South Carolina against the barbarism of the death penalty; Heather Booth, who, at the Midwest Academy, has done so much to help train the community activists who are adding new life to neighborhoods across the country; Irving Howe, a teacher and writer of integrity, who will be astonished at how he is caricatured in this collection as a neo-Stalinist.

On second thought, there are so many people in this category that such a book would be prohibitively long. And also, such people probably don't have time for long-winded introspective and retrospective essays. They are too busy listening to and working with their neighbors, and looking forward.

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