

politician read a briefing by a fellow of the Institute for Policy Studies and decided that well, yes, America really should get out of the military intervention business?

Hirsch, writing about television news commentators, seems to suffer from a malady that is almost the mirror image of Smith's. Hirsch's problem is that both his claims and his book are overly modest. As one who has been writing and researching a book on a similar subject for the past two years (and is obviously open to charges of bias on that score), I cannot but wonder if somehow Hirsch's argument got lost in Smith's subject matter. Political pundits, particularly those on television, really do play an important role in defining the boundaries of Washington's public debate. In the absence of coherent political parties, a responsible Congress, or intellectually defensible election campaigns, they are almost all we get in the way of reasoned political argument.

Yet Hirsch sticks primarily to two points, and I quote from his conclusion: "1) today's political talk shows contribute little, and sometimes even detract from the robust debate needed to sustain a healthy democracy and 2) television leads top commentators astray, making them celebrities or converting them into cartoon figures while diverting them from their finest and most socially useful pursuits."

Great points, but James Fallows made both of them more than four years ago in an essay in *The New York Review of Books* and threw in a few more besides. Most of Hirsch's book is taken up with examinations of the pathetic content of political talk shows and profiles of their performers. He has done some interviews for the book, but the research appears a bit thin. A single David Remnick profile, of "The McLaughlin Group" published in *Esquire* is cited 10 times in 35 pages.

Whereas Smith has written a brilliant history of think tanks, which is slightly undermined by the grandiose claims he makes for the importance of his subject, Hirsch has written an intelligent but overly modest and insufficiently ambitious examination of the role of television commentary. Each author apparently deserved the other's subject. But neither one, unfor-

tunately, brings us much closer to solving the dilemma of our current political predicament.

—Eric Alterman

Facing the Phoenix: The CIA and the Political Defeat of the United States in Vietnam. Zalin Grant. Norton, \$22.50. We have tried to put Vietnam behind us, particularly those parts that deal with American techniques there—and, thus, American failures there. This is a time to mourn our dead, to stand by their monument, and to forget the interminable arguments about "What went wrong in Vietnam?" So still another such book on Vietnam would seem about as welcome as an Iraqi chemical warhead lobbed to our side in the Persian Gulf.

And yet here is an unsettling book, somewhat of a new genre on Vietnam, telling us things we still didn't know and forcing us to think on new levels. In many ways, Vietnamese-speaking correspondent Zalin Grant, who worked in Vietnam during the war for *Time* and *The New Republic*, has written the first comprehensive book to deal with the real issue of America in Vietnam: the "political war" and America's mostly unknown and long-suffering "political warriors."

Grant begins this concise book with a concise conversation between an American colonel and his North Vietnamese Army counterpart, one Colonel Tu, during a meeting in Hanoi just a week before the fall of Saigon. "You know you never beat us on the battlefield," the American tells his North Vietnamese enemy. "That may be so," the Northerner responds, "but it is also irrelevant." That encounter sets the stage for this saga of the "other war"—the war whose buzz words were not "body count" but "civil action," "pacification," and "a third-force solution"; the war waged not by bombers and ground forces but, as Daniel Ellsberg put it, by "the good guys."

"I met a half-dozen guys who thought of themselves as the good guys in Vietnam," Grant quotes Ellsberg as saying. "They believed they were different from other Americans. They had Vietnamese friends, and some of them spoke the language. They didn't believe in the use of air power, but believed we should be engaged in small political

operations. They were contemptuous of the French, and anxious that Americans not imitate them. Above all, they had a view of the way the war was going which was totally at odds with the official view." That is what this book is all about. It traces the parallel war of the Americans in Vietnam—the war of trying to create, impose, and cajole a different and more democratic ideology there—the war that was finally lost along with the military war. But how, and why?

The story is told through one of the "good guys" on the South Vietnamese political side, a man famous to those of us who served in Vietnam, but largely unknown in the United States: Tran Ngoc Chau, "Vietnamese nationalist, brave and incorruptible, one of the most imaginative strategists of the war in the field of political action and pacification . . . brought down by the venality of power politics involving his own government and the government of the United States." Chau went from chief of one of the South Vietnamese provinces, to mayor of DaNang, to head of the pacification program, to secretary general of the South's National Assembly. Grant uses Chau's tragic personal story as an apt parallel to the constant attempts by American political strategists to arrive at a political solution and their constant failures. In the long run, both stories are told, obviously as the result of a monumental research and reporting job and as the result of astonishing evenhandedness on the part of the author, who, despite his clear sympathies, gives everybody his fair say.

The book has a rather interesting format. The author divides it into cities, times, and important developments: Hanoi 1945, Manila 1950, Hanoi-Saigon 1954. . . . He walks through each era with the major players in this political war, men like Lou Conein, John Paul Vann, Keyes Beech, Edward Lansdale, Rufe Phillips. He tells the story of Lansdale, the most original of all the American strategists, the man who beat the Huk guerrillas in the Philippines and thought he could do the same in Vietnam. He tells the story of CIA Director William Colby, who "realized the war had to be fought at the village level" and so tried valiantly "to promote the training and arming of a local militia that could combat the

communists in the villages both politically and militarily." He tells the story of America's own mandarin, Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and his complicity in the assassination of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, an act that stands as the first disaster in the whole disastrous script.

But above all he tells the story of program after program of political warfare: from Chau's village corps, to "pacification," to American "agitprop cadres," to Chau's own Phoenix program and how it went from a political program designed to win over the villagers by defeating Vietcong operatives to being perceived as winning the war. Chau becomes the victim of all of these eventually perverted hopes. He is arrested by the South Vietnamese as a communist, imprisoned, left behind by the CIA he had helped, imprisoned by the North Vietnamese as a southern agent, released to remain an agent in the South, forced to flee as one of the boat people, and finally is settled in America.

"Landing in America was a great cultural shock to Chau," said the famous *Chicago Daily News* correspondent Beech, one of those valiant enough to help Chau. "Nobody knew who he was. Nobody cared. He was just another Vietnamese refugee." Indeed, Grant might have titled this book: "Chau's Story: The Cost of Being a Friend of the Americans." As Grant sums up the book: "Chau had become a symbol . . . of everything that had been lost in Vietnam." When he talks to other Americans about Chau, he finds that "I, too, felt tears welling in my eyes as we spoke. But the tears, I knew, were not so much for Chau, as for ourselves."

Grant is generally a good judge of character (except in a small reference to me in Vietnam, he calls me "staid," which certainly shows he did not know me), and the whole story, the new parts as well as those that have been told before, comes alive. But, most unfortunately, the book falls down in the area of context, in deeper explanations of what went wrong, in the absence of any analysis of what in the end made it impossible for America to form new cadres and a new culture in the same way that the communists did.

The question was not so much "How

did a conventional anti-invasion force fight an unconventional internal guerrilla force?" (in Grant's words) but "How can a great unstructured and miasmic culture like America's, in times of fanaticized nationalism, create an alternate moderate nationalism that will win a fanaticized war?" (in my words). The answer—both of reality and of this book—is that it cannot.

The simple truth of Vietnam—and of so much of the conflict between communism and democracy in the Third World between 1945 and 1989—is that when a single-minded, fanatic, nationalistic ideology takes root in a country, our diffuse and random political efforts do not have a chance. The asymmetry of these sides is too great. A policy like ours, with so many antagonistic actors, with so much disagreement, with such an unfocused purpose, cannot possibly win in the short run against the fatalistic, pure, sublimely anticolonialist true-believers.

Communist ideas permeated Asia, Latin America, Africa, and the Middle East in those four decades by winning the complete confidence of an elite corps of true believers. When American ideas sank in, they did so through example, for at the very core of American democracy is the idea that there should be no one "political culture" or set of goals similar to the communists'. So in the end, the inner confusion of this story only mirrors the inner confusion of democracy—the inevitable inner confusion inherent in forming societies.

In the end, of course, something curious happened: It was "the example" that won. And after the collapses of communism in 1989, everyone in the world could see that, while communism was brilliant in those early, traumatized years of anticolonialism in forming tight-knit totalitarian movements, it was a disaster in forming working economies and long-term, viable political structures.

—Georgie Anne Geyer

World on Fire. George Mitchell. *Scribner's*, \$22.50. Consider coal. When burned, usually to generate electricity, it causes two distinct problems. First, it gives off a variety of traditional pollutants, including the sulfur compounds that produce acid rain. Most of these pollutants can be removed by

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