

UNDERSTANDING VIETNAM

Launch by the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Gareth Evans, of *Nation in Arms: the Origins of the People's Army of Vietnam* by Greg Lockhart and *War By Other Means: National Liberation and Revolution in Viet-Nam 1954-60* by Carlyle A. Thayer, Canberra, 30 November 1989.

Complexity lies at the heart of all honest history. The good historian is part iconoclast: someone who does battle with myths and simplifications.

The two books that we launch today - Greg Lockhart's *Nation in Arms*, and Carl Thayer's *War By Other Means* - are very much in this tradition. Both are works of scholarship and insight. Both set out to chronicle and explain crucial aspects of the complex history of communism and nationalism in Vietnam.

Greg Lockhart's book covers the origins of the People's Liberation Army, taking that remarkable story up to the watershed battle of Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Carl Thayer starts more or less where Greg Lockhart ends: with a study of national liberation and revolution in Vietnam in that crucial period between the 1954 Geneva Conference and the establishment in 1960 of the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam.

In the process, both books explode many myths and bring to life the complexity of Vietnamese nationalism. In particular, both books - in different but consistent ways - examine the process through which nationalism and communism became inextricably intertwined as the Vietnamese nationalist movement grew. And both books place the growth of the movement in the wider context of anti-colonialism and the complicated dynamics of the centuries old China-Vietnam relationship.

Carl Thayer's book teaches us that the communist movement in Vietnam combined many separate strands. It embraced anti-colonialism, Vietnamese nationalism, and revolutionary modernisation as well as Marxism-Leninism. Carl's analysis of the formation of the National Liberation Front in the South effectively makes the case that the NLF was the product of several complex but interrelated factors: the international environment, domestic developments in the North, the state of the Party's underground in the South, and the politics of the Diem regime and its US ally. The book effectively tackles the argument about whether the NLF was a creature of the North or a product of the South by making a convincing case that it both had significant support in the South but came into being as a result of decisions taken in the North.

Greg Lockhart also explores the relationship between nationalism and communism in Vietnam. He concludes that Marxist-Leninist internationalism, greatly influenced by Mao's writings on the role of the peasantry in the revolutionary struggle, became the only ideology able to focus the Vietnamese desire for national independence. As Greg observes in the book: Vietnamese Marxist-Leninism frequently turned Marx on his head. But it was only through a highly self-conscious alignment with Marxist-Leninist internationalism that the Vietnamese proved able to align their revolution with the large culture system out of which - as well as against which - the Vietnamese nationalist movement finally realised the country's independence.

The importance of these two books - quite apart from the substantial contribution they make to scholarship - is that they help us better to understand a nation and a society which still remains, for all the contact we have had with it, largely unknown to Australians.

Ignorance of our regional neighbours can carry a high price as the history of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War showed. If - in the period leading up to Australian involvement in the War - we had understood better the well-springs of Vietnamese nationalism; if we had been more hard-headed, or honest, or both in our assessment of a monolithic Chinese inspired communist movement heading for Australia; and if we had paid more attention to what was happening on the ground in South Vietnam in terms of popular support for successive ineffective governments there, our approach to the war in Vietnam would have been quite different.

If the Australian system of foreign policy formulation had been working effectively, it would have addressed such crucial issues, and it would have been less easy for the political ideologues of the day to lead us into tragic and destructive error in the way they did.

Another lesson of the Vietnam War - squarely relevant to the themes of both these books - relates to the way in which we view the South East Asian region. Australian involvement in the Vietnam War bears witness to that pungent observation of MacMahon Ball that, historically, fear has been the tap-root of Australia's interest in Asia. Our involvement was very much an expression of that psychology of exile, that sense of vulnerability of a European outpost isolated by the tyranny of distance from its cultural roots, inhabiting a rich but sparsely populated continent on the edge of a pressing Asian landmass: a fear which even now we are as a nation only just beginning to overcome.

Our engagement in Vietnam was driven by a sense of defence vulnerability, which was not only misconceived in a strategic sense, but also was pursued without due regard for the type of long-term relationship we wished to build up with the nations of South East Asia. It was a case of over-valuing the role that great and powerful friends, no matter how valuable and powerful, can play in protecting and promoting Australian interests. And it

was a case of seeking purely military solutions - and quick ones - to problems which required long-term political management.

What subsequent Australian Governments - and in particular Labor Governments - have learned from the war was that Australia has no alternative but to come to grips with its neighbouring region, and to try and develop a positive multidimensional relationship with it:

- a relationship based on an acceptance of South East Asia, not as a buffer zone between us and invasion, but as an area where Australia must be constructively and comprehensively engaged, which presents opportunities of many kinds for Australians; and

- an area most certainly of security significance to Australia but an area in which Australia must develop relationships of many facets: political, cultural, commercial, social and individual.

These are all themes on which I will have rather more to say next week when I make a major Parliamentary Statement on Australia's regional security, and the approach we should adopt in advancing our interest, and the region's interest, in a secure common future.

For the present, let me conclude by saying just this. The two books which we launch today are specialist books - complex in their subject matter, and scholarly in their style.

But they are both accessible books, and both important books, because they will both make a significant contribution not only to our understanding of our region, but to reducing that sense of "otherness" between us and our neighbours

- which we must reduce if we are to avoid making again in the future the same terrible mistakes we have made in the past: no more terrible mistake than which was our involvement in the Vietnam War.

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