Review of *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam*

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Comments

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military personnel in the same chain of command. Despite this achievement, the substantive returns on this investment were not sufficient to bring victory and remain open to question today.

For the rest of his public service, essentially a four-year stint in Harold Brown's Department of Defense, Komer dealt with major problems in the same way he had in Vietnam. Working on NATO questions as Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense, and then on the Middle East and on Central Asia problems as Undersecretary for Policy, he met with generally positive but often mixed results.

In the 1980s, out of office and never to return, Komer reflected once more on the Vietnam War, concluding that the best approach to winning would have been to sooner and with more resources apply his nation-building, winning-the-hearts-and-minds, pacification/counterinsurgency approach. Komer also faced the question of why the United States failed to win. The reasons were many on both the American and South Vietnamese sides but the heart of the matter, Jones tells us, was the weakness of the American ally, South Vietnam—a nation led by vacillating politicians and incompetent generals and, because it had time to be no other, a political construct without roots or organic life.

Though Jones mentions it he does not emphasize the possible deleterious impact of Komer's personality on his work. Nicknamed "Blowtorch Bob," Komer, throughout his years of public service, exhibited to one and all administrative abrasiveness and intellectual arrogance, characteristics typical of what might be called the difficult person syndrome. Simply put, the difficult person, although smart and talented, achieves less than expected, or achieves nothing at all, because his or her above mentioned qualities have offended the very people whose cooperation or assistance is crucial for achievement. (Other examples might be James Schlesinger at Defense, Richard Holbrooke at State, and Susan Rice at the United Nations.)

The above notwithstanding, Jones has succeeded in the task he set himself. We now know that Komer, not just during the Vietnam War but later in Carter's Department of Defense, acted as very few had— as a master strategist who understood the national interest and how to develop means to achieve it within the limits of resources and reality: To convey this sophisticated, complex story to readers is no mean feat and Jones has done it admirably.

John Carland
Annandale, Virginia

* * *


In the Vietnam War constructed by investigative journalist Nick Turse, nearly every American soldier was a remorseless killing machine wielding unlimited firepower against a hapless civilian population. Violence, murder, and civilian suffering were the norm, war crimes a natural outgrowth of US command policies. In short, this work puts the carnage of war center stage. Turse has done valuable service in forcing his readers to consider violence against noncombatants in wartime, while challenging postwar narratives which portray atrocities like the My Lai massacre as an aberration. For its subject matter alone, this is a taxing read.

Relying on the records of the Army's Vietnam War Crimes Working Group, and supplementing his research with interviews of US veterans and Vietnamese victims, Turse aims to demonstrate how atrocities became routine for Americans fighting in Vietnam. A constant emphasis on body counts permitted young soldiers to unleash destructive impulses far beyond the scope of acceptable behavior. Turse thus moves from one brutality to the next in workmanlike fashion—the killing of unarmed civilians, the burning of hamlets, the sexual exploitation of women, and the purposeful generation of refugees. So debased had Americans become that "Gang rapes were a horrifyingly common occurrence" (p. 168). Worse, US officials at the highest levels suppressed evidence of these atrocities to combat allegations that criminality had become the norm.

Questioning the conduct of armies in war is a legitimate endeavor, as is focusing one's historical lens on the civilian population. Too many American accounts of Vietnam lose sight of the very object of a "people's war." In hoping to correct this error, Turse underscores the unnerving state of existence in which local villagers faced unpredictable foreigners armed with modern, lethal weapons. "At every turn, the onus was put on Vietnamese civilians to actively demonstrate that they were indeed noncombatants" (p. 55). For a population Americans were supposed to be protecting, such relationships clearly worked against larger US goals in South Vietnam.

Unfortunately, Turse's laudable aim of bringing civilian anguish to the fore is undermined by significant methodological shortcomings. The author loses sight of the political and military context of the war, likely because of his single-minded exploitation of the War Crimes Working Group files. Turse highlights American transgressions in Binh Dinh province, for instance, without acknowledging its role as a revolutionary stronghold. This is not meant to excuse atrocities but the reader is left without any understanding of why US forces were conducting operations in Binh Dinh or the difficulties posed by an elusive, intelligent, and equally violent enemy. In this story, the Vietnamese are little more than victims. Moreover, Turse evaluates none of the vital non-military programs and neglects the role of those Americans involved in civic action. Even if violence eroded their moral principles, not all soldiers were involved in "industrial-scale slaughter" (p. 204).

Turse's accounting thus raises questions about using a narrow body of evidence to make broader generalizations about one of America's longest wars. While he substantiates the horrific acts performed by some US soldiers and marines, Turse sees in his research acts representative of American behavior writ large. Discounted are the voices of countless Americans who genuinely believed—based on experience and doctrine—that protecting the population offered the surest path to a stable, independent South Vietnam.

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Civilian suffering is a serious and most certainly understudied aspect of the Vietnam War that merits discussion. We should do so in a way, however, that values the Vietnamese population as more than just “collateral damage,” while at the same time allowing for the possibility that not all American soldiers were bent on laying waste to the South Vietnamese countryside and its people.

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