

The Long Slide

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The Lost Crusade: America in Vietnam by CHESTER COOPER *MacGibbon & Kee* £3.75

The Military Art of People's War: Selected writings of General Vo Nguyen Giap edited by RUSSELL STETLER *Monthly Review Press* £3.90

We in the West can take hope from both of these utterly contrasting books about Vietnam: in utterly contrasting ways, of course.

Chester Cooper was the leading expert on Vietnam in the Central Intelligence Agency for much of the 1950s and 1960s. His excellent book is a study in frustration, both personal and national. He is a living proof that, contrary to what many people believe, there are members of that powerful agency who take infinite pains to judge critical international problems objectively, and to suggest doveish rather than hawkish policies as far as possible. Unfortunately, the hawks both in the CIA and the US government have too often had the last word, so far. If there is something missing from Cooper's account, which is both comprehensive and subtle, it is perhaps an analysis of the conflicting influences inside the National Security Council, including the CIA; but this is easily comprehensible, even in the absence of an Official Secrets Act in the US.

Cooper's style shows that great diplomatic affairs can be effectively described *con brio* and without dryness or pomposity; which is seldom the case in books written by British diplomats. While never in favour of action for action's sake, he comes across as an activist amongst diplomats; so he was, and this characteristic gave me much pleasure in my close collaboration with him. His attitude to Britain, where he has many friends, is always objective; he has no time for illusions about 'the special relationship'. He lays bare the enormity of the part played throughout by France, right up to De Gaulle's fatuous suggestion that all South-East Asia should be neutralised. This suggestion is being revived, equally inanely, in some British government circles today.

The whole dreadful story of escalation is related with both objectivity and passion, from the foundation of the Viet Minh in 1941 up to 1970. Ho Chi Minh - 'He who Enlightens,' formerly named 'He Who Will be Victorious' and 'The Patriot' - is of course central to developments right up to his death in September 1969. Cooper reminds us that Giap in 1945 paid tribute to 'the particularly intimate relations with China and the United States, which it is a pleasant duty to dwell upon'. In Giap's book the pleasure has turned into rage and vituperation where the US is concerned.

Cooper gives a most human, and often humorous, account of the Geneva Conference of 1954, which he calls 'blueprint for a house of cards'. For the first time Communist Chinese and Indochinese attend a conference in the West. Eden irreparably offends Dulles. Dien Bien Phu falls in the middle of the conference, without the atomic intervention by the US which had been predicted. 'What finally emerged was not very attractive . . . such pious platitudes as "observing the principles of Geneva" are good political slogans but bad policy.' I agree. Successive British governments were too often to ignore this fact. It would not be too cynical to say that the Geneva 'agreements' were signed - by other participants but not by the US government - because the word 'democratic', freely used in their texts, meant diametrically opposed things to the two sides. From Geneva Cooper rushed off to Manila to help Dulles set up Seato, the most effective achievement of which was to provide the US with a justification, on paper, for intervening in Vietnam. The Dulles dominoes theory followed logically enough.

The serious escalation of US forces in Vietnam began under President Kennedy and his whizz-kid Secretary of Defence McNamara. With a weak Secretary of State in Dean Rusk, the military-industrial complex headed by McNamara increasingly took over. Where there had been some 700 'military advisers' in Vietnam when Kennedy became President, the troop level had reached 16,500 by his death in 1963. Cooper was now an adviser in the White House, but he was unable to stem the flow. McNamara's attitude of 'what is good for Ford is good for the US and the world', and his extraordinarily dehumanised approach to the problem throughout his baneful reign of seven years, emerge very clearly from his own disagreeable little book, *The Essence of Security*.

Under President Johnson, McNamara and the near-Strangelove type General Westmoreland were completely let loose on their policy of 'more is better'. Forces and modern armaments were poured into the war, because the human computer McNamara calculated that sheer weight was bound to win; and what general, even if brighter than Westmoreland, has ever declined to have more forces under his command? Moreover, at about six-monthly intervals, top US political authorities - as often as not septuagenarians - would rush about all over Asia and elsewhere, and report that the situation was vastly improved and would shortly be under control completely. President Johnson was not sensitive to the widening of the credibility gap, or the ever mounting protests against the war, in the US and far beyond.

Cooper was a first-class official; but try as he might he could not restrain the boys in the big league. He quit the White House but kept in the closest touch with Vietnamese problems as assistant to Averell Harriman. In this capacity he took part in the

abortive, and sometimes farcical, Wilson-Brown-Kosygin peace discussions in 1966-7, which I described in the NS of 18 December 1970. For some of the time he was, peculiarly, used by Wilson as a sort of Permanent Under-Secretary of the British Foreign Office. All rather frantic, and unavailing. And in 1969 the new President Nixon inherited a legacy of 541,000 US troops stuck in the theatre, not to mention some tens of thousands of naval and air force personnel. Not a single Russian or Chinese was fighting there.

Where, then, is the hope in all this that I mentioned? In Cooper's last chapters, and in President Nixon's policy. In 'No More Vietnams' and 'Crusades, Commitments, and Constraints' Cooper deals with the besetting sin of US foreign policy in the past, misdirected moral fervour, and pleads for a more realistic approach to the major problems, in the nuclear sphere and that of relations with the Soviet Union in general, together with those of a gravely disunited society at home in the US. He chides President Nixon for his Cambodian adventure, and would no doubt say as much about Laos. But the facts now are that the US forces are being reduced, the South Vietnamese are stronger, and a relatively stable government rules in Saigon.

Giap depicts the other side of the coin. He too covers the history of Indochina since the 1940s. He defines his curious title at length on pages 175-6, emphasising the revolutionary, class, and Party character of our military art. Its characteristic is to defeat material force with moral force, defeat what is strong with what is weak, defeat what is modern with what is primitive . . .

In the context of Vietnam he never considers it necessary to mention nuclear weapons; and the communists simply do without air power. 'The strategic orientation is to promote a war by the entire people, a total and protracted war.' He repeatedly praises 'revolutionary violence'. He echoes Cooper's metaphor of the US seeing itself as a knight on a crusade. On a point of fact, it is interesting that he dates the first US bombing of Hanoi, in June 1966, eight days earlier than Cooper.

It is indeed possible to admire the military achievements of the various communist forces in Indochina, both in opposition to the French and to the Americans and their allies. They have, up to a point, put into practice the principles enunciated by Giap; and no doubt his style of writing and rigid Marxist-Leninism are a heady brew for the faithful. It strikes a non-communist, however, quite differently, for a variety of reasons. Giap carries de-humanisation a whole stage further than McNamara. The word 'I' is never once used; nor are any individual names save Uncle Ho - always revered - and, scattered about, those of half a dozen men who performed particularly heroic martial deeds. Even Giap cannot resist the temptation to brag about his account