Gregory A. Daddis, *Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam*, Oxford University Press, New York 2017, p. 320

One of the most persistent myths to arise in the wake of America's lost war in Vietnam is the belief that the Military Assistance Command Vietnam (MACV) implemented a strategic realignment that won the war in the years following the 1968 Tet Offensive only to have that victory wasted after the United States had signed the Paris Peace Accords and withdrawn from Southeast Asia. Advanced over the past forty years by key participants and revisionist historians and embraced by many, this myth makes two interdependent claims. The first is that America's last years in Vietnam constituted a 'better war' – a time when the conduct, character, and trajectory of the allied military effort took a positive and constructive turn, thanks to new leadership and a new strategy that broke sharply with the destructive and counterproductive policies of the past. The second claim is that by 1971 these changes had defeated the political and military aims of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and the National Liberation Front (NLF) and set the Republic of Vietnam (RVN) on a path toward military, economic, and political self-sufficiency. These achievements, it is argued, constituted a 'lost victory' that was thrown away when the United States Congress reneged on its commitments to the South Vietnamese government and abandoned its long-time ally in 1974–1975. Laying at the heart of this myth and the claims that support it is Creighton Abrams, a US Army officer who replaced William Westmoreland as head of MACV in July 1968. Cast in the role of 'saviour general,' it is widely held that Abrams had, upon taking command, transformed the war in South Vietnam from stalemate to a winning endeavour by replacing Westmoreland's simplistic strategy of attrition and brute force with a more nuanced military policy that blended force and politics. Abrams, the myth purports, not only turned the war around by supplanting 'search-and-destroy,' body count, and the profligate use of firepower with 'clear and hold,' population security, and a deft combination of military, civil, and economic policy, he also helped the United States and the Saigon regime achieve victory in the post-Tet period by reviving the pacification program and reemphasising the political and civil aspects of the war in South Vietnam.

Withdrawal: Reassessing America's Final Years in Vietnam is a direct challenge to this myth and its foundational claims. According to its author, Gregory A. Daddis, the 'better war' / 'lost victory' myth is an overly reductive and highly inaccurate reading of the past. Its central flaw lies in two historical fallacies. The first is the argument that there was a fundamental change in strategy once Abrams assumed command. Proponents of the 'lost victory' / 'better war' thesis argue that Abrams implemented a novel concept of operations that was qualitatively different from his predecessor's. Known as the 'one war' concept, Abrams' plan called for the synchronisation of combat operations against enemy forces, pacification and nation-building efforts in the countryside, and programs to train and modernise South Vietnam's military. While this is an accurate description of Abrams' well-balanced approach, the concept was not much different from what Westmoreland had employed during his tenure. Daddis' previous work, *Westmoreland's War: Reassessing American Strategy in Vietnam*, shows that Westmoreland did not, as critics claim, fail to grasp the war's political dimension or view the war simply through the prism of conventional warfare. Nor did he develop a wholly military strategy that ignored pacification and dogmatically adhere to a narrow strategic concept focused on killing the enemy using heavy formations and overwhelming firepower. Westmoreland not only identified and respected the intricacies of communist revolutionary warfare (a sophisticated hybrid politico-military movement that meshed conventional combat operations, guerrilla warfare and mass politics), he developed and implemented a broad concept of operations that included pacification and nation-building activities, and that addressed the war's political as well as its military dimensions. Yes, attrition through conventional combat operations was a cornerstone of Westmoreland's strategy, but it was not the only tool in his kit.

Withdrawal builds on this reassessment and overturns the argument that there was a fundamental change in strategy during the post-Tet period. Daddis shows that rather than disjuncture, there was a great deal of strategic and operational continuity between Abrams and Westmoreland. Like his predecessor, Abrams relied on heavy firepower and conventional combat operations, including sweeps, clearing operations and search-and-destroy missions to annihilate or eject communist forces from South Vietnam and expand Saigon's hold over its territory and population. The military wing of the southern insurgency, the People's Liberation Armed Forces (PLAF), or 'Viet Cong' as they were called, remained a viable threat throughout the countryside despite suffering heavy losses in the Tet Offensive. Moreover, the expeditionary wing of the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN), or North Vietnamese Army (NVA), also continued to threaten the Saigon regime and its armed forces from a constellation of base areas and safe havens spread throughout South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. To keep communist main-force units at bay and pacify rural areas, Abrams had no choice but to root out and destroy insurgent elements using main-force combat. Pacification, contrary to its name and descriptive (and often deceptive) euphemisms such as 'winning hearts and minds,' 'securing the population' and 'nation building,' was not a bloodless popularity contest. Rather, it was a violent political process of reasserting government control over rural areas largely through force. Pacifying the

countryside relied as much on the 'stick' of combat actions as it did on the 'carrot' of land reform, civic action, community development, and national and local elections. Thus, pacification was never a gentler, kinder form of warfare, even under Abrams. In fact, pacification had an even more devastating impact on the civilian population after 1968, when the Accelerated Pacification Campaign and other efforts to rapidly expand government control over population and territory brought combat operations to the villages and hamlets of the coastal lowlands and the Mekong Delta. The frequent use of overwhelming firepower in and around populated areas, particularly allied airstrikes and artillery fire, were a mainstay under Abrams. Such operations brought devastation to villages and hamlets, incurred civilian casualties, and generated thousands of rural refugees.

The second historical fallacy underpinning the 'better war' / 'lost victory' myth is the argument that a revitalised pacification program had achieved spectacular success in the years following the Tet Offensive. This success, it is argued, helped win the war in South Vietnam by 1971. For many, peak levels of government control in the countryside, low levels of insurgent activity throughout South Vietnam, increased economic growth and community development in rural areas, and unprecedented numbers of South Vietnamese citizens serving in regional security forces and local militias was tantamount to an allied triumph. But as Daddis reveals, the primary goals of pacification – self-defence, self-government, and self-help – were never fully achieved despite genuine forward progress in these areas. If the purpose of pacification was to provide a secure environment, build a strong economy and, most importantly, forge a national political community based on widespread support for the Saigon regime, then the program must be deemed a failure because it did not achieve any of these things in a consistent or durable manner. The communist insurgency, despite suffering setbacks, survived. It was never eliminated or reduced to obsolescence. Moreover, the gains pacification made in population security, community development, and political legitimacy were uneven, fragile, and subject to sharp reversal when forcefully challenged by communist guerrillas and main-forces. They were also totally dependent on American largesse and US firepower. Pacification was only ever as strong as the conventional military 'shield' that protected it; and when the shield proved permeable or was removed altogether, the program's weaknesses and vulnerabilities were revealed. The true failure of pacification, however, lay in the inability of the Saigon regime to take advantage of the NLF's struggles in the countryside after 1968 and deliver a political vision that resonated with the South Vietnamese people. In the end, pacification stalled because it was unable to achieve its ultimate purpose: to unite the population and forge a national political community that rejected the NLF and embraced the Saigon regime as the sole legitimate power in South Vietnam.

Closely tied to the foundering of pacification was the failure of Vietnamisation. Whereas the former was meant to help the Saigon regime attain social, economic and political independence, the latter was supposed to help it achieve military autonomy. Yet as Daddis reveals, this never happened. South Vietnam's regular ground forces, the Army of Vietnam (ARVN), and its irregular territorial forces, the Regional Forces

/ Popular Forces (RF/PF), both had spotty combat records. They were also beset by a number of weaknesses that undermined their overall effectiveness, including widespread corruption, high rates of desertion and low morale among the rank and file. ARVN's combat capabilities were questionable in every major test it faced during the post-Tet period, including the 1970 Cambodian incursion, Lam Son 719, and the 1972 Easter Offensive. Although debate continues over ARVN's overall effectiveness during these engagements, one thing was certain: South Vietnam's ground forces were utterly dependent on American airpower and would have fared much worse without American assistance. Daddis believes Vietnamisation ultimately failed because the program's goals of rendering the RVNAF self-sufficient was an impossible task given the circumstances. Abrams was expected to whip South Vietnam's armed forces into fighting trim and prepare it to assume the sole burden of South Vietnam's defence against an unrelenting and powerful hybrid communist attack – all within a limited timeframe and with diminishing combat support from the American military. The steady withdrawal of US forces that began mere months after Nixon took office, Daddis argues, was an indicator that the White House no longer believed the war was 'winnable' (in a traditional sense) or worth fighting anymore. For Nixon and Kissinger, the only way to pacify domestic critics and a war-weary American public, preserve America's credibility abroad, and facilitate détente with China and the Soviet Union (the administration's preferred Cold War foreign policy) was to de-Americanise the conflict and hand stewardship back to the Saigon regime and its armed forces.

Rather than analyse America's final years in Vietnam chronologically, Daddis takes a thematic approach. Chapter 1 examines the war Abrams inherited in 1968 and dissects the 'one war' approach put in place by MACV to address the situation inside South Vietnam. Daddis confirms that while a great deal had changed after the Tet Offensive, particularly on the grand strategic level, little had changed in MACV's strategic concept of operations. Moreover, the political changes that had occurred, most notably new leadership, the opening of the Paris Peace Talks, American withdrawal and Vietnamisation were made in Washington and lay outside of MACV's ability to control. Chapter 2 explores Vietnamisation and the process of 'de-Americanising' the war in South Vietnam. As in the previous chapter, Daddis shows that there was little Abrams and MACV could do to influence larger political currents, and that their role was simply to manage the decline of the American military presence. The decisions emanating from the Nixon White House, he concludes, circumscribed both the strategic options open to Abrams as well as the ability of the general to influence what was by 1969 was a political and grand strategic fait accompli. Chapter 3 analyses the pacification program. Daddis admits that MACV had paid closer attention to solidifying RVN control over rural areas after Tet. However, pacification was a violent process that could not exorcise the communist presence from rural areas, overcome the weaknesses of the Saigon regime, nor garner widespread popular support for the government. Chapter 4 looks at the tensions between Nixon's grand strategy and Abram's military strategy. The need to simultaneously balance ongoing military efforts in South Vietnam, the

withdrawal of American combat forces, and the training and modernising of RVNAF vis-à-vis the ongoing diplomatic talks in Paris and a possible brokered settlement proved daunting. In the end, the war's larger contexts and the decisions made in Washington subverted Abrams' ability to manage the competing demands of defeating the enemy on the battlefield, de-Americanising the war and strengthening the RVN to assume the burden of its own defence. Chapter 5 further undermines the claim that the post--Tet period constituted a 'better war' by exploring the decline and distress of the US Army during the years of American withdrawal. As Daddis illustrates, a host of systemic problems that included drug use, racial conflict, low morale, insubordination, the deliberate killing or 'fragging' of officers, and atrocities such the My Lai Massacre made for a worse, not better, war after 1968. Chapter 6 explores the major political and military developments that marked America's final years in Vietnam. Intended to call into question the idea that America had ultimately lost the war in Vietnam because it had been stabbed in the back by political forces in the United States, the chapter shows that Washington's ability to achieve its foreign policy objectives in Vietnam (a viable, independent, non-communist government south of the 17th parallel) was fatally undermined by developments it could not control. In the end, it was the overall weakness of the RVN along with Hanoi's relentless quest to topple the Saigon regime through force rather than pusillanimous politicians and perfidious protesters back home that produced communist victory in the spring of 1975.

Overall, *Withdrawal* is a masterful deconstruction of the 'better war' / 'lost victory' myth that exposes the logical fallacies and historical inaccuracies that underpin the belief that a saviour general implementing a winning strategy had turned the Vietnam War around and achieved victory in the years following the 1968 Tet Offensive. The book is also commendable for its meditations on the interconnectedness of war and politics, the relationship between military strategy and grand strategy, and the limitations of military force in the age of limited war. The idea that the war in South Vietnam was Abrams' to win or lose places too much faith in the utility of American military force and ignores the fact that larger political currents remained outside MACV's ability to control. No commander or military strategy could have resolved the deep political differences that divided the Vietnamese people and pitted one faction against another in a bitter struggle to define Vietnam's future. Nor could Abrams save a war that was for many politicians in Washington, particularly Nixon and Kissinger, already lost and no longer worth fighting. *Withdrawal* highlights these truths and exposes the shaky foundations upon which the 'better war' / 'lost victory' myth rests. Although the book would have benefitted from a more thorough treatment of the Vietnamese perspective – both communist and anti-communist – it is, nonetheless, an important and long overdue addition to the historiography of the Vietnam War.

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