

**Book Review**  
**America's Longest War by George Herring**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, 1996, McGraw-Hill, 340 Pages**

George Herring's *America's Longest War* (hereafter ALW) is a popular and often cited book, used in many college classes over the past two decades. Herring himself is considered among the pantheon of Viet Nam experts. ALW receives high ratings from Amazon readers, receiving a top 5 star rating from 59% of reviewers, and 26% giving it a 4 star rating. Thus, 85% of Amazon's reviewers give ALW very high rating, suggesting it to be a reliable and comprehensive examination of Viet Nam and America's involvement. A thorough examination yields a different judgment, showing ALW to be excellent if not outstanding, not in terms of historical accuracy but in terms of how thoroughly American academia has been hypnotized by conventional wisdom which does not hold up under thorough examination. In sum, ALW is an excellent example of group-think herd mentality. Those seeking a thorough, comprehensive, coherent explanation of Viet Nam's complexities had best go elsewhere. It is a form of conceptual plagiarism, in which the legion of Viet Nam would-be scholars simply reiterate and rephrase the same story, the same plot, much as 1930s "B westerns" all had essentially the same good guy-bad guy plot.

This is not to say that ALW is altogether inaccurate as it does contain elements of factual truth and does describe, in part, significant aspects of accurate history. It does, unfortunately, weave these truthful threads together with enough falsehoods, enough incorrect assertions, enough distortions, enough very serious omissions to create an inaccurate portrayal, and one that does not provide the reader with a sound grasp of Viet Nam realities.

This review is critical of ALW, arguing that it is shoddy history. This does NOT imply that the reviewer approves of or is otherwise in agreement with American politics, tactical doctrine, and pseudo-strategy in Viet Nam and Indochina. On the contrary, the U.S. Government is, in this reviewer's informed opinion, guilty of criminal negligence, malfeasance, dereliction of duty, in formulating an unacceptably flawed pathetic excuse for a strategy. This does not however negate an indictment of flawed history found in ALW.

ALW's format is conventional, laying out a chronological chain of events in 7 chapters covering 1950 through 1975. There is nothing in layout or content that might cause doubt in students or those new to the subject. ALW will be and has been read by many who emerge believing they are sufficiently informed and enlightened. Such is not the case. In ALW's preface, Mr. Herring states he does not believe the war could have been won. Fair enough. Still, this does not permit exclusion of important and abundant material contrary to the author's viewpoint and it does not justify any other form of distortion. It does not justify examples of slanting things to prove one's point, nor does it justify clear and evident examples of outright inaccuracies. To paraphrase Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Some people possess ideas while others are possessed by them." Mr. Herring gives every indication of one who is indeed possessed by ideas and is unable to see beyond his preconceived perceptions.

It is easy to support this allegation, simply by noting examples of shoddy scholarship found in pages of ALW. These come in several forms:

1. Outright falsehoods
2. Slanting and misportrayal
3. Omissions of important historical developments, the exclusion of which allows readers to form false opinions.

**A sampling of completely false ALW assertions**

1. Assertion, pp. x-xi that U.S. was defeated in war. This is not supported by any reliable information. The U.S. Was defeated politically and psychologically, but not militarily.
2. P. 51 false assertion that North Vietnamese residents were duped by CIA propaganda and induced to leave for South Viet Nam in 1954. A complete fabrication. Those people fleeing North Viet Nam did so because they had seen communist barbarity first hand. They needed no convincing from outside sources.
3. P. 56 assertion that the Cao Dai religious group “exercised political control over much of the Mekong Delta.” Entirely false. Cao Dai were concentrated outside of the Delta, in Tay Ninh Province and most certainly did not “exercise control” in the Delta, because they weren't there in numbers to do so. Statement reflects lack of in-depth knowledge of basic political realities.
4. P. 84 assertion that Khrushchev January 1961 speech, calling for “wars of liberation” was not really a threat but supposedly was meant to “reassure” the west of Moscow's peaceful intentions. This is conjectural nonsense.
5. P. 170 allegation that communist forces dug “thousands of miles of tunnels.” Herring does not make this statement himself but includes a graphic from another unidentified publication with the statement which he presumably believes. This is utter fatuous nonsense unsupported by any data, any source or information. It is imagination run amok. There were no “thousands of miles of tunnels.”
6. P. 178 assertion that refugee camps were “fertile breeding grounds for insurgent fifth columns.” Nonsense. There is no documentation, no information source, no proof that this statement is accurate or anything except gossip.
7. P. 255 assertion that Phoenix program reports of VC neutralization were “grossly inflated” and that abuses “sometimes generated support for the NLF.” Again, there is no body of evidence, no reports, no research, to verify these assertions. They are fabricated, if not by Herring than by someone else.
8. P. 260 assertion that Defense Department told President Nixon it did not know where COSVN was located (Central Office For South Viet Nam, the VC/NVA control HQ for southern third of South Viet Nam) or “whether it even existed.” Sheer nonsense. Mr. Herring cites Truong Nhu Tang's *VIET CONG MEMOIR* as a source.. Mr. Tang, the “Minister of Justice” for the PRG, clearly states COSVN's location was nearly pinpointed by allied forces, it certainly did exist, and it was almost overrun in the '70 Cambodian incursion. COSVN's general location was known, as was its existence. To assert otherwise is sheer nonsense.
9. P. 271 assertion that “NLF” launched a '72 offensive in the Mekong Delta. Not true. “NLF” (VC) forces were incapable of conducting Delta-wide large scale attacks and such attacks as did occur were conducted by NVA units or “VC” units manned with NVA fillers. Attacking VC/NVA units were driven back and sustained very high casualties. They should have been able to wreak havoc in the Delta, with 4 of ARVN's 9 regular Regiments (from 21<sup>st</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> divisions) deployed to MR III outside of the Delta. They did nothing beyond getting chewed up and spit out in only two locations where heavy attacks occurred.

10. P. 276 assertion that Provisional Revolutionary Government (PRG) was a “functioning government” is product of Herring's imagination. The PRG was incapable of governing anything and had neither manpower nor aggregate skills to do so. It owed its very existence or presence of NVA regulars.
11. P. 288 assertion that 9,000 Americans were hired by the GVN, “many of them hastily discharged from military service,” presumably acting as advisors. Another completely false invented “fact.” It is conjectural nonsense. It is idiocy. No U.S. personnel were “in the employ” of the GVN. This is ridiculous assertion.
12. P. 298 assertion that “angry ARVN soldiers” fired on departing Americans is sheer fiction. It may have happened once or twice but there was no, not any, wholesale instances of ARVN troops firing on Americans. It did not happen.
13. P. 302 statements that no “bloodbath” occurred and that “some” boat people perished at sea. First, Herring does not state what criteria must be met to qualify for a “bloodbath” and his statement implies no executions took place. The assertion is wrong. The Jackson-Desbarat study suggests that upwards of 50,000 people were executed in the first five years of “liberation” and personal accounts of reeducation camp prisoners cite executions. To say there was “no bloodbath” is absurd. Secondly, Herring's statement that “some” boat people perished at sea would not allow the uninformed reader to assume that 250,000 people are estimated to have died at sea. It is a stretch, it is obscene, to say “some” equals 250,000. This is an inexcusable departure from historic accuracy.

This is simply a sample of the false statements polluting ALW. They are simply not true.

### Subliminal Inferences

Another means of distorting history is by slanting matters, using implications and inferences to suggest an underlying ominous truth that is not articulated but is perhaps even more effective in subliminal indoctrination.

1. P. 68 acknowledgment that from 1955 through 1960 South Viet Nam's rice production doubled under Diem's government, which presumably was beneficial to the country. Yet Herring concludes “much of the increase was taken up by domestic consumption” and concurrent gains in “industrial productivity were insignificant.” Thus, reader is left with false impression that nothing much had been accomplished; it was all for naught. Herring provides no data, no research, nothing to substantiate his allegations. It is true because he says so. Material prosperity of Vietnamese rice farmers, improved diet of Vietnamese people, is of no interest to Herring.
2. P. 178 implied assertions that GVN '67 elections essentially provided for and signified nothing. Mr. Herring would do well to read Charles Joiner's *The Politics of Massacre*, which, among other positive observations, expresses admiration if not wonder for GVN's elections in wartime. Mr. Herring might also add a parenthetical observations that there has NEVER been a multi-party, free election in communist Viet Nam. It is illegal to form another political party.
3. P. 209 assertion that “pacification incurred another major setback” after Tet '68 attacks. The situation was unclear, at that time, but as time passed it was evident no long-term setback in pacification took place. On the contrary there was no “major setback” at all. In fact, the indigenous VC went into a tailspin form which they would never recover, no longer capable of posing a strategic threat to the GVN

and completely reliant on NVA regulars from North Viet Nam. The inference of a looming threat is invalid.

4. 4. P. 302 allegation Viet Nam refugees were not, as commonly perceived, a “model minority” but rather were adrift in poverty, hammered by discrimination, and generally in a sorry state. This is simply untrue. Viet Nam refugees have thrived and prospered in the U.S. Herring cites no data, no studies or references, to support this assertion.

### Inexcusable Omissions

One means to deceive, misconstrue, distort, sometimes even to lie, is to omit material that is contrary to one's viewpoint, and might invalidate if not nullify conclusions an author wishes to convey as truth. In Herring's defense Viet Nam's complexity is such that two or three volumes, at a minimum, are necessary to begin to cover the subject in sufficient depth. Still, the constraints of a one volume book do not allow for omission of vital, important, significant historical realities and developments. Herring's ALW, like far too many would-be “histories,” have omitted far too much material to be considered an honest, comprehensive history.

1. 1. Ho Chi Minh's pseudo-nationalism. Ho Chi Minh used nationalism as a ruse. In 1945 he ordered Giap to wipe out non-communist, anti-French nationalists, The Viet Nam Quang Dan Dang, the Dai Viet, the Dong Minh Hoi, the Hoa Hao. Blood flowed, and even Trotskyite variations of communism were hunted down and shot by Ho Chi Minh's forces. A true nationalist would not have done this. Hanoi defector Col. Bui Tin, now living in exile in France, said Viet Nam would have achieved independence by 1950, with far, far less bloodshed, had Ho Chi Minh be willing to work with other nationalist groups. Further, Ho Chi Minh and other Hanoi ideologues have clearly stated that nationalism was secondary to communist internationalism. While Ho Chi Minh fooled millions with his nationalist posturing, it was, at best, a malignant pseudo-nationalism. To paraphrase Edmund Burke, “Let us not praise them for their nationalism until we see what they do with it.” After all, Hitler was a “nationalist.” The KKK lays claim to “nationalism.” “Nationalism” does not call for prohibition of political parties, does not call for armed imposition of a political system in adjoining countries (Laos, Cambodia).

Many Vietnamese people did truly believe Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist, but then again many German people thought Hitler was a nationalist savior.

2. 2. Implicit suggestion of a tranquil SE Asia and wholly imaged threat of “falling dominoes.” Post WW II SE Asia was an incandescent cauldron of volatility. Malaya fought a war with communist insurgents from 1948 to 1960. The Philippines battled with Huk communist forces in early '50s. Communist forces tried to take over Indonesia in 1948 and again in 1965. Ample documentation exists underscoring potential for increased insurgent warfare throughout SE Asia, to include these informative volumes, none of which is included in Herring's bibliography: Peter Lyons' *War and Peace in South-East Asia*, Justus van der Kroef's *Communism in South-east Asia*, and Donald Kirk's *Wider War*. The latter book documents Hanoi's training Thai insurgents, beginning in 1962.
3. 3. Failure to explain Hanoi's three-phase protracted warfare and progression from “guerrilla war” to main force conventional warfare. Vo Nguyen Giap and Truong Chinh both wrote books outlining Hanoi's three-phase strategy, and progression from small scale “guerrilla” tactics to the overwhelming conventional battles which were the only way victory could be achieved. They neither expected to win or planned on winning with “guerrillas.” Implicit in Hanoi doctrine was and remains

a growth dynamic, a process by which military and political capabilities grow and expand, each complementing the other. This is a sine qua non for victory. Thus, while Herring and others, quite mistakenly, assert the U.S. Found itself in a "stalemate," this same stalemate would be, in the eyes of communist leaders, a recipe for eventual defeat. This was reasoning impelling Hanoi to launch the Tet Offensive. SOMETHING had to be done to break a dangerous perceived stalemate.

4. 4. Geographic aspects of the war. 65% of U.S. Combat fatalities took place in 12 of the former RVN's 44 provinces. These provinces ran from Hau Nghia north to Quang Tri. ALL bordered on either Cambodia or Laos or Laos and NVN. Most of these provinces were thinly populated. This reflects significance of Ho Chi Minh trail running through Laos and Cambodia. The idea that "no place was safe" in Viet Nam is part true, and part gossip, in either case not sufficient to explain the entire situation.
5. 5. Allied participation. No reader of Herring's book, or many other "histories" for that matter, could discern that Americans were not the only combat forces in Viet Nam. So. Korean, Australian, New Zealand, and Thai units also fought. Of course, Republic of Viet Nam Armed Forces (RVNAF) receive scant attention from anyone. This despite their sustaining, by 1975, approximately 275,000 combat fatalities. Over all, U.S. Combat fatalities were about 18% of allied total. South Vietnamese accounted for the most, nearly 80%.
6. 6. Laos and Cambodia were integral elements of Hanoi's strategy, militarily and politically. Most would-be "historians" fail to cite Hanoi's "invasion" or "incursion" into Laos and Cambodia, in violation of treaties Hanoi had signed in 1954 and 1962. Had South Viet Nam been a peninsula it would have been an entirely different war and without the Ho Chi Minh trail and "sanctuaries" in Laos and Cambodia, Hanoi could not have waged its war.
7. 7. Massive changes with passing of time. 1962 Viet Nam was entirely different from 1969 or 1972 Viet Nam. Readers of ALW, and far too many other supposed "histories" will never ascertain the major and massive changes taking place in the course of the war, from the early 60s through its end. In the early 1960s RVNAF regular forces were incapable of dealing with mobile VC battalions of approximately 400 men, and regiments of upwards of 2,000. By 1972 the situation had changed completely. GVN regional force and popular force elements, province and district units, were confronting and defeating NVA regulars. Weaponry underwent major and ominous changes. Mortars and recoilless rifles used by VC elements were supplanted by devastating NVA artillery, infra-red anti-aircraft missiles, AT-3 wire-guided missiles, and many, many T-54 tanks. It was not a "guerrilla" war any longer.

Scale and intensity of combat changed completely, and was reflected in number of communist forces committed to major offensives. In Tet '68 an estimated 84,000 VC attacked country-wide. In 1972 Hanoi committed at least 125,000 in the first wave of its Nguyen Hue offensive. In the final '75 offensive Hanoi deployed an estimated force approaching 400,000, armed with the most modern weaponry available. This at a time when RVNAF was starved for munitions, fuel, weapons, spare parts, etc. VC/NVA combat capabilities in '75 more than the 5x suggested by 84,000-400,000 force ratio, due to modern weapons, an armada of Russian trucks, scores upon scores of superior 130mm artillery, better than any artillery U.S. Supplied to RVNAF.

This was NOT the same war being waged in the early 1960s, yet readers of ALW and similar pseudo-histories will never realize this central fact.

1. 8. Collapse of indigenous VC after Tet '68. The '68 attacks were an utter disaster for the communists, as even Herring admits. What he and others do not say however is that over the years an estimated 220,000 VC/NVA defected to the GVN (most were indigenous VC). The VC defeat was pivotal insofar as rural people had had enough of the VC, had seen the VC were indeed human and could be defeated. The GVN handed out 400,000 WW II small arms to hamlet Popular Self-Defense Forces (PSDF). These weapons were, former used by RVNAF regulars who were now supplied with modern weapons. By 1970 land reform was underway and tens of thousands of formerly impoverished tenant farmers were getting title to the land they worked. Communist offensive activity dropped, rice production increased, and had it not been for a continued and increasing infusion of NVA regulars from North Viet Nam the war would have dried up and withered away. While the GVN was hardly a modicum of enlightened government and corruption was still a serious problem, it was still, in the eyes of many people, better....or less bad....than the communists.
8. Post-'75 Viet Nam and Indochina. Herring, like many others, grossly understates the misery and suffering of “post war” Vietnam and Indochina. Infant mortality doubled within a year after Hanoi's conquest. Infant and maternal mortality, as well as overall malnutrition rates, of the three communist countries (Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia) were twice that of the four non-communist neighbors (Thailand, Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia). There was and is no freedom of speech. Dissent brings prison time. Presently Viet Nam ranks 175<sup>th</sup> out of 180 countries surveyed by Reporters Without Borders in terms of press freedom...or lack thereof.

Hanoi ideologues violated every one of the 14 points in a 1962 NLF “manifesto,” a document promising every democratic freedom imaginable. Former communist or communist supporters defected, their dreams, their hopes betrayed.

Readers of Herring's book will remain oblivious to all this.

9. 10. Communist brutality. Some readers of ALW and other similar books will emerge with idea that the “revolutionaries” were, like the benign “Uncle Ho,” simply noble people fighting for “reunification” and peace and justice, and..... In truth, as emphasized by Giap, they were instilled with hatred, taught to be merciless, and that the sacredness of their cause permitted any and all violence, to include killing in diabolical fashion. Over the course of the war an estimated 36,000 South Vietnamese were assassinated (not killed in heat of combat). These were almost exclusively all civil servants, teachers, village and hamlet chiefs, etc. America's premier Viet Nam scholar, the late Douglas Pike, called this a form of genocide to exterminate the natural leaders of the country. In addition to know assassinations another 55,000 were abducted and most were never seen again. It is presumed they too were executed. Everyone is familiar with the atrocity at My Lai, as they should be. Few people however know about Dak Son, where approximately 250 ethnic minority Montagnards were killed by NVA forces, many of them literally melted by NVA flamethrowers.

This murder and carnage must be included in any honest history.

In view of all the above it is easy to discern how and why Herring's book, along with others of similar flaws and limitations (Karnow's book a supreme example) is viewed with disdain, and why it is argued that the book is not a comprehensive, honest, thorough history as much as it is a recitation of flawed conventional wisdom, in which no small amount of communist

propaganda is blended. Judge Learned Hand declared “The truth lies in the facts,” and there are abundant and far too many facts excluded, indeed censored out, of the American discussion of Viet Nam.

Academia is not alone in its failings. Every major U.S. institution failed in Viet Nam, and failed to an unacceptable degree. Hence the shortcomings and abundant foibles and flaws of ALW come as no surprise, and are simply one facet of systemic U.S. Ineptitude and clumsiness in SE Asia..

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