

Paul Ham, *Vietnam: The Australian War*, HarperCollins Publishers, Sydney, 2007.

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The history of Australian involvement in the Vietnam War can never be told without delving into the complex political web that drew Australia into the conflict, and brought Australian involvement to an end. In his book *Vietnam: The Australian War*, Paul Ham labels the Vietnamese conflict as the ‘politicians’ war’, signalling the distinctive role of politics in this particular confrontation. While endeavouring to include as many sides of the story as possible, Ham’s aim is to place the Australian soldier at the centre of the narrative, and could almost be described as a tribute to the soldiers who fought.

The first chapter opens with a soldier saying goodbye to loved ones, and throughout the book it is clear that Ham’s argument is focused on the soldier’s war, rather than the title’s suggestion, the Australian war. He undertakes a challenging and somewhat ambitious task in covering the detail of Vietnam’s history, from the occupation by the Chinese, to the flight of the refugees following the fall of Saigon in 1975. The chapters follow a chronological exploration of events leading up to both American and Australian involvement, the heating up of debate on the homefront, combat on the battlefields, the steps that lead to the eventual withdrawal of troops, and the aftermath of the conflict. He details the events and key figures in a colloquial style, often with descriptive imagery. For example, he describes the various influences of protest as ‘hundreds of little tugboats’ that became a movement that ‘wrenched Western society from its settled anchorage’. Ham’s research is impressive, drawing on a broad range of archival resources, as well as numerous interviews with Australian veterans and civilians, and Vietnamese veterans and civilians.

Ham's argument initially casts the Australian Government in an ambiguous light. While not overtly blaming the government for Australia's involvement in the conflict, he continuously portrays the government as being uninformed and misled, particularly by the United States and a corrupt South Vietnamese government. Ham casts the Australian soldier as a pawn in a complicated political game, 'to fulfil a diplomatic courtesy to America' and 'harnessed not to an American policy or strategy but to the American ego.' He downplays the skill of the American troops, who he argues tended to alienate the Vietnamese people rather than win their trust. Conversely, Ham heralds the success of the Australians' 'superior tactics' as soldiers, and he leaves the suggestion that the outcome of events might have proved to be different if the Australian tactics had been implemented more widely.

A weakness of Ham's argument is that he does not remain objective in surveying the Australian homefront during the Vietnam War. While acknowledging those who protested against the war peacefully and on moral grounds, Ham accuses the Australian Government and the Australian people of collectively betraying the troops, and he labels the peace movement as becoming 'a cantankerous and irrelevant farce.' With the flight of Vietnamese refugees from the Northern regime, Ham pointedly states, somewhat heatedly, that this was 'the regime so many Western protesters had supported.' His sympathies remain with the soldiers, who he claims were forgotten by the uninterested Australian public. The protesters are considered to be fickle in their crusade, as Ham argues the 'anti-war protesters and draft resisters are quieter now – installed in careers, enjoying their grandchildren or pursuing new causes.' The tone of Ham's argument almost chastises the Australian public for the way the soldiers were treated upon their return home. The inclusion of the Welcome Home march can be viewed as Ham's acknowledgment and tribute to the soldiers, however, he leaves the reader feeling as though no amount of reparation will ever be enough to make amends.

At times, Ham reveals sympathy for the teenage soldiers fighting for the communists. He paints the picture of these youths 'like so many rag dolls' being coerced into fighting, and argues that the 'chief victims were, as always, young Vietnamese soldiers and civilians.' He condemns, however, the authorities driving them forward, and details many of the guerrilla techniques of the Viet Cong. Ham argues that brutal acts of war performed by the communist forces have not been condemned sufficiently by historians. He criticises Western historians who 'have failed to condemn communist attacks against southern civilians', and implies that the Western forces should not be judged according to one standard of values and the communist forces according to another.

In his concluding chapter, Ham raises many questions regarding the tragedy of the Vietnam War. Where does the blame lie? Who should be accountable? These questions remain mostly unanswered, and the reader is left to contemplate the misfortune of the war and the continuing need to grieve. Positioning the Vietnam War within the tensions of the Cold War, Ham warns against viewing the conflict as merely one battle in the broader confrontation between the Western world and communism. Perceiving this view as a means for securing Western success, Ham argues that the Vietnam War must be set apart as a unique conflict, otherwise it 'ceases to be a singular human catastrophe from which we might learn.'

Telling the complete history of Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War is an ambitious task. While he does not remain completely objective throughout his argument, Ham is thorough in exploring the many aspects of the conflict in great detail. The book sets out to honour the Australian soldiers who fought in Vietnam, and is a mark of respect for the men and women who served, 'the only participants in this sorry tale who did what was asked of them.' Ham is successful in showing the complexity of the war, including the lasting impact and the unresolved questions that remain.

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