There are many discouraging things about the ongoing debate over Vietnam. One is the bewildering tendency of participants to try to rest their case on concepts and arguments that are themselves in question. An example is the frequent reference to “national interest” and “national security” as though they clinched the debate. On close inspection, such terms are found to mislead and becloud.

In the widely acclaimed book, *The Limits of Intervention*, Townsend Hoopes rests his conclusions on these same dubious notions. His thesis is that the “limits of intervention” are defined for the United States by its “vital national interest.” Since nothing about Vietnam can be considered vital to us, we ought to stop intervening, and get out as soon as possible. In his appeals to “national interest,” Hoopes is joined by several of the people represented in *No More Vietnams*; Samuel Huntington, Stanley Hoffmann, James Thomson, Edwin Reischauer and Hans Morgenthau also assume that the notion of national interest tells us something conclusive about intervention in Vietnam and elsewhere.

Reading Hoopes’ book and *No More Vietnams*, two questions arise: First, what is meant by the “national interest” or the “national security” of the United States, and how do we determine it? Second, assuming we can establish meaningful definitions, why ought the U.S. to follow exclusively its own interests and security in making policy?

Coming to any consistent understanding of these terms is difficult, as is apparent in *No More Vietnams*. According to some of the contributors, the United States has an interest in protecting the security of the world, preventing great discrepancies of wealth and opportunity, helping nations that can help themselves (Reischauer), in developing multilateralism and protecting U.S. security (Thomson and Hoffmann), in promoting stable political institutions in developing countries (Huntington), in not promoting political reforms in other countries and not pursuing illusory goals (Hoffman), in maintaining the balance of power in Asia, but not intervening there in a piecemeal fashion (Morgenthau).

There are a number of shortcomings to arguing from this perspective. First, “national interest” is, in present usage, a vacuous concept, defined by whatever an individual happens, on some ground or other, to find worthy. Nothing would be lost if we simply replaced “the national interest is x” with “I favor x.” In fact, the latter would clarify discussion because the speaker would be required to go on to justify his preferences, while mere reference to “national interest” gives the illusion of a justification. Second, the interpretations of “the national interest” are very vague, even when one gets down to cases. As guidelines for intervention in Vietnam or elsewhere, they involve some “pretty subjective determinations,” as Chester Cooper puts it. And “national security” is almost as question-begging as “national interest.” If we define it in the fashionable way, as “the ability of a nation to protect its internal values from external threats,” we can see that determining security first depends on determining a nation’s internal values. This is not impossible of course, but in specific cases there is likely to be dispute over what are a nation’s values and what it takes to protect them. In any case, the term “national security” invites these subsequent questions about national values.

Hoopes is not much more helpful in defining the two terms than those scholars mentioned above. But worse, he is not clear on what it means to be guided by the national interest. He apparently feels that early and total withdrawal from Vietnam is in our interest because it will restore coherence to our foreign policy, alleviate deep-seated strife in our society, properly reorder priorities by removing the “running sore” of U.S. military involvement, and will in no way endanger our national security or prestige. These concerns seem to be “interests” considered solely from the point of view of the United States. In fact, much of the time Hoopes uses “interest” and “security,” he seems to interpret them “according to the advantage of the United States.” But it is impossible to be sure that that is all he means. From time to time he argues the disadvantages of U.S. policy from a Vietnamese viewpoint. When the U.S. has gone, he says, a satisfactory political accommodation can probably be worked out, and, better still,
the corrupt Saigon regime will likely give way to a more humane and equitable order.

What is confusing is whether “U.S. interest” means, (a) “according to the advantage of the United States, with only secondary consideration of the advantage of the Vietnamese and other interested parties,” or whether it means, (b) “according to the mutual advantage of the United States, the Vietnamese and other interested parties.”

Whichever of these positions Hoopes would adopt—I suspect he would favor (a)—neither one will do without more elaboration and defense. If Hoopes means (a), then he will have to do more than simply assert that the U.S. ought always and primarily to seek its own advantage, for naturally we want to know why. If there are good reasons for such a position, Hoopes does not even begin to supply them. If Hoopes means (b), we will need exposition and defense of how to determine the mutual advantage of the U.S., the Vietnamese and other interested parties. Under (b) we will have to explore those tricky questions regarding what is good from the perspective of the Vietnamese and the other parties, and then try to balance the answers with what we somehow decide is good for us.

Whether one adopts (a) or (b), I doubt that he can completely avoid considering what he believes to be good from the perspective of the U.S. in some relation with what he believes to be good from the other parties’ perspectives. And to do that job is to discover that there is no easy way around all the many complicated facets of the Vietnam debate, some of which are insufficiently treated by Hoopes. The social and political developments in Vietnam and Southeast Asia, the world-political facts of life, the intricate legal disputes, the military, strategic and tactical controversies, and the domestic and foreign requirements confronting the U.S.—all these facets must be considered in thinking through what is good for the U.S. as well as for the countries most directly affected by its policies. The difficulty with concepts like national interest and national security is that they divert our attention from the complexity of thinking questions through. They act as slogans where hard thought is needed.

Fortunately, some of the books listed here, together with portions of the two already cited, do help us think carefully about these questions. A popular view today is that Americans do not know what is good for the Vietnamese because we share no common values with them, as we do with people of European origin. The conclusion is that all

The Limits of Intervention (An Inside Account of How the Johnson Policy of Escalation in Vietnam was Reversed), by Townsend Hoopes. David McKay Co., 1969. 245 pp. $5.95. A compelling account, from a former Under Secretary of the Air Force, which provides insight into the context of policy-making concerning Vietnam. The author’s general interpretation and his recommendations in favor of total and early U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam are widely echoed in current discussions.


Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution, by John T. McAlister, Jr. Alfred A. Knopf, 1969. 377 pp. $7.95. At a time when American academics show shocking little interest in Vietnamese studies, it is encouraging that there is one American scholar capable of producing so insightful and informed a volume.


War, Peace and the Viet Cong, by Douglas Pike. The M.I.T. Press, 1969. 186 pp. $5.95. Pike is an employee of the USIA, and a scholar of Vietnamese affairs. He wrote the classic study, Viet Cong: The Organization and Techniques of the N.L.F. in South Vietnam, and his present book is an informative extension of that ground-breaking work.

No Exit From Vietnam, by Robert Thompson. David McKay Co., 1970. 224 pp. $4.50. Sir Robert was Deputy Secretary and Secretary for the Defense of Malaya, 1957-61, and helped to guide the successful campaign against the guerrillas there. He was also head of the British Advisory Mission in Vietnam, 1961-65, and has become an advisor to President Nixon on the war. He is author of Defeating Communist Insurgency, which John McAlister once described as “a classic” in the field of revolutionary war.
U.S. mistakes in Vietnam were bound to happen, and our only course is to withdraw and let the Vietnamese themselves determine what is good for them. People who make this argument should read McAlister's excellent study, *Vietnam: The Origins of Revolution*. By tracing the historical development up to 1946, McAlister shows that the revolutionary setting in which Vietnam found itself was the direct result of French colonial rule. "Nationalism" does not exist in Vietnam as the result of some age-old yearning for national identity and unity, but rather as the result of an anti-French movement that drew upon values introduced by the French themselves. Parochialism and regionalism are more natural to the Vietnamese. The conditions for revolution were not originally introduced by indigenous Communists, but again, by the French themselves. France instilled the values of "modernization"—political participation, economic and educational opportunity, individual achievement and motivation—and then prevented their realization. Serious disruption was almost inevitable. Thus, if things are as McAlister says, it does not appear that Vietnamese values are totally outside our range of comprehension.

Another popular view is that the Communist movement in Vietnam (the Vietminh and its offshoots) has been "genuinely nationalist," and, as such, is representative of the aspirations of the overwhelming majority of Vietnamese and of the other parties in the area. By "genuinely nationalist" two things are normally meant: first, that the movement was exclusively concerned with Vietnamese independence and nationhood, and, second, that it has been a widely inclusive movement.

Again, McAlister's evidence raises doubts about the validity of such a view. For one thing, "In the move to redesignate the party [in 1929] with the title 'Indochinese Communist' lay the claim for a Communist successor state for the whole French colony, rather than an emphasis on independence for the three nations founded on the historic cultural identities of the peoples of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos" (p. 92). Next, the Vietminh was originally and continuingly a northern-based movement which had little success in the south "due to a complex set of factors related to the more complicated political environment in southern Viet Nam... What these differences indicated was not only a contrast in political landscape between the regions of Vietnam, but also the fundamental limitations of the development of a national identity" (p. 196).

The Vietminh did achieve success in the north, partly as the result of their organizational skill and of the political opportunities they offered. Moreover, the Vietminh were more inclusive than other groups. They made limited inroads into the south, though often as the consequence of terroristic methods (see pp. 206-9). Nevertheless, McAlister's account implies, the reach of the Vietminh far exceeded its natural grasp, and the book leaves the impression that there remains a competitive revolutionary political situation in southern Vietnam. The revolution has never been the exclusive preserve of the Vietminh or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. Both are an important part of the revolution. But since they did not originate it, they need not necessarily dominate it. If they succeed, it will be as much through the avoidable failures of the French, the Americans and the South Vietnamese to develop modernizing political institutions as through the ingenuity and persistence of the Communist movement.

This is certainly Robert Shaplen's conclusion in *Time Out of Hand*. "The opportunity for finding an ultimate 'southern revolutionary solution' remains, and even for keeping the result independent of the north:... But for that to happen, and for it to become a real alternative to Communist control, will require far more wisdom and imagination than either the South Vietnamese or the Americans have so far revealed. ..." Shaplen emphasizes "the strong tradition of southern separatism" with its own revolutionary potentiality. This potentiality is not limited to the N.L.F. On the contrary, the N.L.F. has compromised its southern identity by falling under the organizational domination of the north.

Pike, in *War, Peace and the Viet Cong*, confirms this view, agreeing that the N.L.F. is part of the revolutionary development in Vietnam and represents "a political process" that engenders "new types of political behavior." But it is not, he says, a widely representative force. Regionalism and parochialism remain enormous obstacles to the extension of N.L.F.
control. Pike estimates that, as of late 1968, the N.L.F. could claim no more than ten to fifteen per cent of the population as willing supporters. Among the South Vietnamese the N.L.F. suffers from the northernization of its leadership, a process which has been going on, Pike contends, since the early 1960's. Northernization has been speeded up through the elimination of southern leadership in the war and as the result of declining recruitment in the south. And, as Shaplen puts it, the image of the N.L.F. has also suffered from its "long-imposed rigidity and toughness," practices required by its lack of widespread popularity.

What of the non-Communist revolutionary potential in South Vietnam? One may be persuaded, as I am, by the complementary accounts of McAlister, Shaplen, and Pike that the specific designs of the D.R.V. and the N.L.F. do not command anything like majority support in South Vietnam. But what political arrangement could command that support? What are its chances for survival and how can it be developed? Here there emerges some divergence among our authors.

In *No More Vietnams?* Huntington outlines a program of political development or "nation-building"—including training political leaders, reforming institutions, and creating opportunities for participation. But the reaction of certain colleagues to such proposals is predictably harsh. Hoffman believes the idea of the U.S. as nation-builder in Vietnam is a myth for at least two reasons: because "aliens" cannot build values and institutions for others; and because the resources for a stable representative government do not exist in South Vietnam.

In light of the McAlister, Pike and Shaplen findings, Hoffman is perhaps over-confident on this score. McAlister's whole point is that the "nation" of Vietnam—in its modern sense—was made conceivable only in relation to the values and institutions of the alien French. Moreover, McAlister is critical of the French and the Americans precisely because they missed real opportunities to help shape and direct the Vietnamese revolution. McAlister, like Shaplen, is not deterministic about the failure of French and American wisdom and imagination. (Indeed, Hoopes and several of the contributors to *No More Vietnams?* do have some insightful things to say about the bureaucratic and ideological reasons for some of the colossal failures of comprehension characteristic of U.S. policy in Vietnam.)

Whether the resources exist to develop a South Vietnam that is "a free, united and independent country which is politically stable and economically expanding," such as Sir Robert Thompson foresees, is surely the biggest uncertainty of all. Thompson and Pike seem cautiously optimistic; Shaplen is more skeptical, but not without hope; and McAlister hints that, given the right perspective, all is not lost. In the light of the pessimism expressed in *No More Vietnams?* (based on discussions held in June, 1968, not long after the Tet Offensive), it is most significant that there is any hope at all.

Shaplen is strongly critical of the Saigon regime for resisting, rather than encouraging, a "southern revolutionary ethos." He proposes a new infrastructure, an extensive reorganization of the armed forces, attention to improving and broadening political leadership, and, above all, "a thorough overhaul of the administrative system." These proposals seem close to Thompson's, who stresses that "during the next two years the test is likely to be more in the political, administrative and economic fields than in the military." Thompson and Pike are more optimistic than Shaplen that some of these crucial changes in political and military reorganization are already taking place. On balance, however, I appreciate Shaplen's stringency. It seems Thompson has not applied the same critical scrutiny to the present practices of the Saigon regime that he has applied so effectively to other aspects of the war.

Because the debate over Vietnam policy has been locked in "take-it-or-leave-it" terms, we have not demanded refined examination of the actual pressure points and margins of flexibility that do exist in the politics of South Vietnam. Attention to political development would seem to call for that. It does appear, as McAlister points out, that the Constitution of 1967 provides a hopeful superstructure for unifying a "multiplicity of parochial groups in what could become pluralistic institutions. By contrast with the totalitarian nature of the Communist regime in the north, this would be a historic accomplishment indeed." Yet, most of the difficult work of actualizing that promise still remains to be done. How that is to be done, if it can be, strikes me as the most fundamental revolutionary task of all. Though I see no reason for despair, I find it hard to be as encouraged as Thompson by present trends.

On the other hand, Hoopes' confidence in the likelihood "of a political balance which will be able to avoid domination... by the N.L.F." after the U.S. has quickly withdrawn, seems questionable. Both Pike and Shaplen understand the necessity for eventual accommodation with a "southernized" N.L.F., but, for the immediate present, it is Pike who sees things as they are: "The problem is not
how to bring [the N.L.F.] in, but how to allow it what it has a right to have, which is a share of power, without allowing it what it wants, and has no right to, which is a monopoly of power.” (Regarding the probabilities of a “bloodbath” in South Vietnam, in the event of an early and total U.S. withdrawal, Pike’s recent monograph, The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror, ought to be compared with the more sanguine predictions of certain authorities.)

Trying to measure what is good from the perspective of the Vietnamese requires, in part, awareness of political and social developments. If the literature under consideration does not resolve all the questions, some of it challenges certain uncritical assumptions that underlie much of the current discussion. But the Vietnam struggle also involves “other interested parties.” Shaplen’s book in particular enables us to look realistically at Vietnam from the point of view of concerned Asian nations in the area, and thus to begin to gauge what is at stake for them. His conclusion will surprise many, but it is carefully supported: “In Asia we are in the odd position of having made blunders in Vietnam and yet of having gained friends by the simple act of having maintained a worthwhile if misconstrued commitment. If Ho Chi Minh has outlasted us in political patience, most of the rest of Southeast Asia is grateful for what degree of patience and fortitude we have demonstrated.”

...it is most significant that there is any hope at all.

We have already cited McAlister’s reference to the long-standing designs of the North Vietnamese on all of Indochina. From interviews and personal observation, Shaplen offers evidence that the Cambodians (including the now deposed Sihanouk) and the Laotians have good reason to regard the North Vietnamese and the N.L.F. as a threat to their independence—a threat, incidentally, which has its own historic sources, and is not primarily the result of the presence of the U.S. in Southeast Asia. Shaplen’s examination of Malaysia-Singapore, Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia is informative, and written with Shaplen’s usual critical scrutiny. (His account of the events leading up to Sukarno’s overthrow is a classic in its own right.) One learns from Shaplen’s survey how unwise it is to generalize about “what’s good for developing Asian countries.” Each country must be individually examined.

As to the conduct of the war itself, Hoopes argues in a peculiar fashion. He is properly critical of the “Westmoreland doctrine,” which featured reliance on heavy fire power, search-and-destroy operations, a strategy of attrition, and sometimes indefensible relocation procedures. Hoopes’ narrative is fascinating and revealing so long as he describes the growing awareness within the Johnson Administration that the doctrine was bankrupt. He documents the loss of confidence in the blustering rhetoric and the over-optimism of civilian and military supporters of the doctrine, and emphasizes the mounting distress on the part of Clark Clifford and others at the destruction being caused in Vietnam and at the disruption at home. In these respects, Hoopes’ revelations and judgments are unexceptionable, and thoroughly backed up by Shaplen, Thompson and several contributors to No More Vietnams?

What is peculiar is the conclusion about future policy that Hoopes draws from the failures of the past. He reduces our options to a grand either/or: either withdraw totally or pursue victory-throughattrition, à la Westmoreland. Are those the only options? Throughout his book, Hoopes himself invokes Robert Thompson’s earlier criticisms of the Westmoreland strategy, and he several times endorses Thompson’s recommendations in favor of defending population centers, radically curtailing the policy of “mini-brute” force and focusing on political control. Indeed, Hoopes states that if we had adopted sooner the sort of things Thompson was proposing, we might well have been successful. But then, rather abruptly, he asserts that by March, 1968, “it was too late to turn back and start afresh.”

Whether it was (and is) is, of course, the crucial question. Thompson thinks not. Particularly in the last chapter of No Exit From Vietnam, written after his trip to Vietnam in late 1969, Thompson contends that the game is far from up. He speaks of some encouraging changes in strategy, improvements in pacification and security, a new atmosphere in which “the people were aware that the government side was now the stronger and the Viet Cong the weaker,” and a consequent exodus of the refugees back to the countryside. In distinction from Hoopes, Thompson sees hope in the general outlines of the Vietnamization strategy, though he is anything but complacent.
about the "rocks in the road." He sees the possibility of a diminishing U.S. role so as "to reduce both American casualties and costs."

A healthy skepticism toward all expert opinion on Vietnam has always seemed to me the wisest attitude to adopt in the debate. So many people on all sides of the debate have been so wrong, it is better to pay attention to arguments and evidence than to credentials. Scrutiny of Thompson's views is particularly in order now that they have become, to some degree, "official." As he may have overrated the positive prospects of the Saigon regime, he may also be overly optimistic about the security situation in South Vietnam. Still, on independent evidence, Thompson's assessment of the military situation appears reasonable. By contrast, Hoopes' judgment that there remains no chance to develop a middle way between early withdrawal and undiminished U.S. military involvement seems too categorical.

Appeals, like Hoopes', to "national interest" have a strange fascination for Americans. We would like to be able to say, "Look at all Vietnam is costing us; we've done enough," and then wash our hands of the whole bloody business. But our hearts are not in such talk. Sooner or later we are disturbed by questions posed, not only from our point of view, but from the point of view of the Vietnamese and Asians. Is a total and early withdrawal clearly best from their perspective? Will it in fact improve their conditions or worsen them? Are there no intermediate options between early withdrawal and maintaining the war at the present level? Have we in fact "done enough," or have we perhaps followed wrong, but correctible, policies, and thereby incurred some continuing responsibility?

These are the difficult questions. If the literature under review does nothing else, it helps us recognize how difficult they really are.

**DEVIL THEORIES OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY**

_Ernest W. Lefever_

Devil theories of history and politics are the offspring of curiosity and frustration. Sensitive participants and observers of the human drama want to know why events have turned out as they have, especially when they end in disaster. Why World War I? Why the "fall" of China? Why are we "bogged down" in Vietnam?

Every modern man pays lip service to the reality of multiple causation, but the very mystery and complexity of untoward events compel some people to search for the central flaw, the fatal error, the demonic force beneath the misfortune. In this quest modern man is not far removed from his primitive cousin.

Tracking down and identifying the devil behind the failures, alleged or real, of U.S. foreign policy is a popular pastime at home and abroad. The enormity of American power, the ubiquity of the American presence, and the apparent absence of a rational scheme to explain the exercise of our power invite frustration and perplexity that cry out for a simple answer, a single key that will unlock the mystery of American foreign policy. When things go wrong in the far corners of the world, you can be sure that someone will blame the Americans and equally sure that someone else will have discovered the hidden force that explains why Washington acts as it does.

This secular search for the devil should not be confused with serious theological efforts that point to the moral ambiguity of man as the key to understanding the ambiguity and inconclusiveness of the historical drama. A recognition that original sin and original righteousness set the limits and possibilities of man's achievement does not provide us with a simple evil force—man, agency, or institution—responsible for error or evil. In contrast to this sober view of history, the popular devil theorists claim to have discovered a specific and definable demon that can exorcized.