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The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War (review)

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Hoover Institution of Stanford University for further study.

The *Liberty* has been the subject of thirteen U.S. and Israeli investigations, all of which concluded that the attack was an accident. However, conspiracy theories abound because many of the documents and investigations remained classified for years, and since the U.S. has never factually stated the *Liberty*'s mission, which was probably to monitor Egyptian communications. Some of the theories in circulation regarding the *Liberty* are that the U.S. and Israel colluded to attack the *Liberty* to destroy evidence that the U.S. was assisting Israel, that the Israelis attempted to destroy the ship because it intercepted Israeli transmissions which tricked Jordan into entering the war, and that Israel attacked the *Liberty* because the ship learned of Israel's secret intention to attack Syria. The author disproves these and other wild speculations and offers a critique of the large body of work on the subject. Some of the author's sharpest criticism is aimed at the recent book by James Bamford, *Body of Secrets*, and a History Channel program, *Cover-Up: Attack on the USS Liberty*, which was "produced without adequate research, fact-checking, and attention to detail" (p. 184).

The author concludes that the attack on the *Liberty* resulted from a series of mistakes—the failure of the *Liberty* to receive five transmitted orders directing it to leave the war zone, the Israeli Navy's eagerness to see action, a rivalry between the Israeli Navy and Air Force, the misidentification of the *Liberty* as an Egyptian ship, and several others. This book is a must for anyone studying the *Liberty* controversy, which it brings to a close.

David M. Witty

Amman, Jordan

The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War. By David Anderson. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. ISBN 0-231-11492-3. Maps. Appendixes. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Pp. xiv, 308. \$45.00.

Twenty-seven years after the fall of Saigon to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, the American war in Vietnam remains a controversial and complicated event for the population of the United States to comprehend. In *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War*, David Anderson attempts to simplify the approach to understanding the war by presenting a source that is a "versatile, objective, and reliable" guide for readers who seek "to understand the intense and significant debate over the war" (p. xii) and is intended to make the history of the conflict "accessible to contemporary readers and applicable to their concerns" (p. xi). The book follows in the historiographical tradition of the various earlier compendia on the conflict such as John Bowman's *The Vietnam War: An Almanac* (1985), James Olson's *Dictionary of the Vietnam War* (1988), Stanley Kutler's *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* (1996), and Spencer Tucker's *Encyclopedia of the Vietnam War* (1998).

The well-organized book is divided into five parts: a historical narrative of the war (86 pages); a mini-encyclopedia of key events (87 pages); indi-

viduals, military operations, etc., and a chronology of events (14 pages); an impressive and very useful annotated bibliography on the war (51 pages); and a two-part appendix containing relevant historical documents and statistical data relating to the war (41 pages). The historical narrative is presented chronologically and provides an overview of the wars in Vietnam. It begins with a brief section on “studying the Vietnam War” and goes on to cover Vietnamese and American historical backgrounds, French colonialism and the French war in Vietnam, the American war in Vietnam, and the legacy of the war in the United States. Anderson focuses heavily on the American involvement in Vietnam and places the war in the larger context of a battleground of the global Cold War. What makes the narrative useful and unique is that within the chronicle, Anderson poses questions that deal with key issues and controversies about the war. For example, in the discussion of Vietnamese history, he asks “What are the nature of and the relationship between nationalism and communism in Vietnam” (p. 13)? In the part dealing with the Kennedy years, he asks “Would Kennedy have withdrawn rather than escalated the U.S. military presence in Vietnam” (p. 41)? With a few exceptions, the relatively balanced answers to these and other such poignant and relevant questions are woven nicely into the narrative and allow the reader to get to the heart of the key issues surrounding the war.

The only drawbacks to this work are the lack of footnotes in the narrative, the alarming absence of much mention of the Lao and Cambodian theaters of the conflict, some confusing claims on Vietnam’s main religion (Confucianism vs. Buddhism), and the author’s inability to really answer some of the questions he poses in the narrative. Anderson’s prose is direct, clear, and free of interfering jargon. Overall, this work provides a very useful introduction and guide to a complex and controversial subject. It should be used as a jumping off point for students and scholars for deeper study into the American war in Vietnam.

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Prelude to Tragedy: Vietnam 1960–1965. Edited by Harvey Neese and John O’Donnell. Foreword by Richard Holbrooke. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2001. ISBN 1-55750-491-1. Map. Photographs. Notes. Selected bibliography. Index. Pp. xviii, 309. \$32.95.

This is an excellent collection of essays by American civilians and Vietnamese officials who sought to build support for the South Vietnamese government and improve rural living conditions in the period before the U.S. deployed conventional military units to Vietnam. Co-editors Harvey Neese, an American agricultural specialist, and John O’Donnell, a former province representative for the U.S. Agency for International Development (AID), pulled together insightful articles that give the reader a notion of the scope