

A Roundtable on Amanda Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall: Refugees and U.S.-Vietnamese Relations, 1975-2000*

Sandra Scanlon, Gregory A. Daddis, Pierre Asselin, Kathryn C. Statler, David
Anderson, and Amanda C. Demmer

Introductory Essay, Roundtable Review on Amanda Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall: Refugees and US-Vietnamese Relations, 1975-2000* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021)

Sandra Scanlon

It was hardly surprising that several of the contributors to this roundtable review of Amanda Demmer's *After Saigon's Fall* referenced the U.S. war in Afghanistan and the potential significance of her work in guiding our understanding of how American wars end. I am writing only a month or so later, and yet from a European standpoint at least, the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan has already faded from news cycles. That war, fought in stealth by comparison to public engagement with the U.S. war in Vietnam, will undoubtedly have national and international ramifications both predictable and as yet unknown. However traumatic the war was for some Americans, and certainly for the people of Afghanistan, it seems impossible to imagine that many Americans today will face the same social and cultural traumas bred by the Vietnam War. Claims that the United States has a moral commitment to protect Afghans and those fleeing Taliban rule may therefore lead to little in terms of policy. But that story has yet to play out.

Demmer's *After Saigon's Fall* puts the issue of post-conflict migration and refugee crises at the heart of analyzing the move toward normalizing relations between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Without denying the significant role of White House actors, she reinforces perspectives that emphasize the agency of Congress in policymaking during the 1970s and, in this case perhaps more importantly, the function of grassroots activists who championed "humanitarian" issues in the form of family reunification and U.S. acceptance of the war's refugees. Contact between Washington and Hanoi relating to the implementation of the resettlement proved as important, if not more so, than discussions over accounting for POW/MIAs in fomenting closer working relations between the post-conflict capitals. As a work of scholarship, *After Saigon's Fall* does several important things, not least of which is to address the issue of America's *unending* war in Vietnam from a new perspective. It challenges our understanding of the myriad ways in which wars continue to play out both domestically and internationally long after peace is supposedly declared.

Each of the reviewers praise Demmer's meticulous research and the breadth of her analysis, with Anderson justifiably noting that "her argument and conclusions resonate well beyond the Vietnam War itself." Demmer's work speaks to the story of how global refugee policies developed up to the early 21st century, and the function of this issue in U.S. policy developments more broadly. As Statler comments, the processes that Demmer analyses "played a significant role in putting human rights front and center as the moral *lingua franca* of 21st century international relations." The reviewers were united in commending the significance of Demmer's consideration of grassroots activism in putting what the U.S. termed "humanitarian" considerations in the driving seat in terms of policy toward the SRV. While previous scholarship has explored the domestic cultural relevance of the POW/MIA issue and has demonstrated its relevance in constraining U.S. policymakers' options relating to normalization, Demmer offers an alternative perspective on how policy was both formulated and how the negotiation/implementation of these policies influenced the practicalities of cooperation between Hanoi and Washington.

Anderson contends that Demmer is most original in her examination of the relevance of initiatives like Khuc Minh Tho's leadership of the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) and Ginetta Sagan's creation of the Aurora Foundation, while Daddis notes that one of Demmer's most insightful arguments is that policymakers were unable to divide humanitarian considerations from political ones, in large part because of advocacy groups like the FVPPA. While each of the reviewers hint at the significance of these humanitarian considerations, Statler is most explicit in highlighting the ways that *After Saigon's Fall* reveals the efforts of the Reagan White House to use humanitarianism to fight communism and continue the war against Vietnam by non-military means. This is, therefore, a story that builds on earlier studies of the legacies of Vietnam, but one that significantly diversifies our understandings of how coming to terms with the war and its consequences played out in policy.

The question of a lack of breadth is also raised, with Asselin and Statler in particular noting Demmer's failure to engage with sources from Hanoi. As Demmer rightly affirms, her work focuses primarily on developments in United States policymaking, and any attempt to fully integrate the course and causes of Vietnamese decision making would have made for a much longer book. Asselin

sees Demmer's approach as part of a wider methodological issue among scholars of U.S. foreign relations, stemming in no small part from limited language skills, to diminish the relevance the other governments—specifically the Vietnamese—in determining the nature or course of relationships.

In the context of exploring *relations* between states, rather than the domestic sources of U.S. policies, this point is well made. Demmer has done much, as each reviewer resoundingly praises, to bring Vietnamese voices to the fore through her examination of grassroots activism among Vietnamese actors in the United States. As Daddis highlights, "though Demmer's attention remains fixed on American attitudes toward normalization, she demonstrates how South Vietnam persisted as a 'ghost nation' long after its international demise." Yet, Statler comments that the "SRV's reasoning ... remains obscured," and Asselin more pointedly notes "that this is not a book about US-Vietnamese relations; it is about US relations *vis-à-vis* Vietnam, about US-based actors' perspectives on US-SRVN relations." It is an important point, and these methodological questions will, I suspect, continue to stimulate much needed debate among our increasingly diverse and thankfully vibrant research community. Amanda Demmer's work, as the following reviews demonstrate, contributes a great deal indeed to these debates, our understanding of America's Vietnam War, and the global history of refugee crises.

Review of Amanda C. Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall: Refugee and US-Vietnamese Relations, 1975–2000*

Gregory A. Daddis

Back in 2019, the musical *Miss Saigon*, which made its Broadway debut nearly three decades earlier, toured the United States and came to the Hollywood Pantages Theatre in Los Angeles. My wife Susan and I took in a Sunday afternoon showing, our first time seeing a revival of the Tony-nominated production. It was a lavishly designed and robustly lighted performance, full of Vietnamese-style thatch huts, American helicopters, and a massive wrought-iron gate replicating the U.S. Embassy's barricades in downtown Saigon, circa 1975. Despite its dramatic staging, though, something clearly seemed off with the musical; it was dated and inelegant despite its colorful costumes and energetic choreography.

Weeks later, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen helped interpret the show for us in a searing *New York Times* editorial. As he has done in so many of his writings, Nguyen spotlighted the ways in which popular American culture too often draws "from a deep-seated well of derogatory images of Asians and Asian women." *Miss Saigon* proved no different. Nguyen declared that despite its problems, the musical endures because it allows the audience to feel a sense of privilege, embracing "the viewpoint of the powerful white male savior" who adopts a "mixed-race child," a "stand in for childlike Asia, in need of Western benevolent guidance."¹

Nguyen argued that *Miss Saigon* might not be so upsetting if "there were other stories about Asians or Vietnamese people that showed their diversity." Of course, he's right. Still, over the last few decades, an increasing number of writers have offered candid, nuanced insights into the Vietnamese American community, elevating narratives beyond surface-level depictions of Asians as "small, weak, effeminate people" requiring guidance from their American benefactors.

Recent authors have opened windows into these displaced communities, building off and advancing classic works like Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed*

Places. Nguyen's *The Sympathizer* is perhaps the most famous of these works, though his nonfiction *Nothing Ever Dies* is an indispensable read for historians. Also indispensable are the works of Ocean Vuong and Andrew Pham, both gifted commentators on the Vietnamese wars that brought so many "refugees" to the United States. "Yes, there was a war," Vuong tells us. "Yes, we came from its epicenter." But neither he nor his mother, to whom he tells his story, were born from war. "I was wrong, Ma. We were born from beauty."²

All these novels, memoirs, and histories suggest what it might be like to be "stateless," to be untethered from one's home and family because of the demographic ripple effects of war. They also challenge us to accept Yén Lê Espiritu's argument that depicting Vietnamese as the "newest Asian American 'model minority'" is a problematic oversimplification. Moreover, as Espiritu claims, the "production of the assimilated and grateful refugee . . . enables a potent narrative of America(ns) rescuing and caring for Vietnam's 'runaways,' which powerfully remakes the case for the rightness of the U.S. war in Vietnam."³

Works from passionate voices within the Vietnamese diaspora also submit, as does Mary Dudziak in *War Time*, that the boundaries between peace and war are often blurred in time and space.⁴ Wars don't neatly end with peace agreements or surrender ceremonies. Trauma can be passed along from one generation to the next, ensuring that war's legacies survive long after the guns fall silent.

Yet even perceptive works highlighting the Vietnamese diaspora's diversity are arguably incomplete, for they tend to downplay the organizational and institutional histories behind the personal stories. If war indeed is a political act, then political bargaining in the aftermath of the fighting certainly shapes how wars endure and ultimately conclude.

It is here that Amanda Demmer, an assistant professor of history at Virginia Tech, intervenes to provide depth to the historiographical landscape with an inspired addition to what we might call the "long American war in Vietnam." As Demmer brilliantly shows, the Southeast Asian conflict persisted well after the fall of Saigon in April 1975, its battlefields moving from South Vietnam's villages and jungles to displaced Vietnamese activists' kitchens in Falls Church, Virginia, and congressional offices in Washington, DC.

While Demmer focuses mostly on legislative bureaucracies and non-governmental organizations coming to terms with one of the largest war-induced exoduses in recent history, hers is hardly a stale monograph on "migration politics" (227). Rather, Demmer brings life to the decades-long "normalization" process between the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV). This is a story of family separation as much as it is one of international relations.

Indeed, what makes this such a compelling work is that in unraveling a tale of bureaucratic politics, Demmer illustrates, in superb fashion, how individuals matter; how their decisions, their advocacy, and in some instances their sheer determination can alter the path of history. By book's end, readers cannot come away unimpressed by the exploits of activists like Ginetta Sagan and Khuc Minh Tho, who fought for the rights of those Vietnamese most affected by a war that endured well beyond Saigon's fall.

Where Demmer excels is in highlighting the paradoxical notions of U.S. policy toward Vietnam after 1975, of perpetuating wartime hostilities while pursuing humanitarian aims. All the while, she emphasizes the tensions between and within advocacy groups navigating political decisions that were both paternalistic and

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confrontational. In many ways, *After Saigon's Fall* builds upon earlier works from Carl Bon Tempo and Edwin Martini to demonstrate how Americans' military loss in Vietnam incentivized those seeking to continue the war against Hanoi on other, less public fronts.⁵ These bellicose crusaders, however, were forced to contend with humanitarian and human rights activists seeking to alleviate the familial pains of a refugee crisis that lasted for decades.

Demmer adds to this historical perspective by arguing that U.S. officials in charge of migration programs ended up prioritizing three groups of South Vietnamese: "boat people" with family connections to the United States; former South Vietnamese officials and soldiers imprisoned in communist reeducation camps; and the nearly 50,000 Amerasian children who remained in Vietnam after Saigon's fall. Ultimately, more than one million Vietnamese would relocate to the United States, even while most Americans remained preoccupied with achieving a "full accounting" of the roughly 2,500 U.S. servicemen listed as POW/MIA. Perhaps we should not be surprised by this nationalistic emphasis, but Demmer explains why the remote, even fantastical, possibility of returning American prisoners of war remained so alluring far into the 1990s.

Given so many conflicting interests undergirding the U.S.-SRV normalization process, it would have been easy to lose readers in a swirling mass of regional and international policymakers, nongovernmental actors, advocacy groups, and family activists. While the author avoids this pitfall by organizing her book chronologically in three parts, early on it is apparent that she is not marching lockstep through history. Clear threads of humanitarianism, human rights, and foreign policy decision-making keep the story thematically tied together. And though Demmer's attention remains fixed on American attitudes toward normalization, she demonstrates how South Vietnam persisted as a "ghost nation" long after its international demise (5).

Part I details the harrowing days when South Vietnam ceased to exist as a state entity, though perhaps not, the author intimates, as a political entity. As both Americans and Vietnamese tried to make sense of Saigon's collapse, advocates already were thinking about issues related to migration and refugee statuses. Demmer is at once sympathetic to and critical of the Ford administration, which was attempting to plan for the evacuation of Americans and their South Vietnamese allies from Vietnam even as it faced an increasingly assertive Congress in Watergate's aftermath. She also places this episode within its proper Cold War context, noting how U.S. officials often defined "refugee as one fleeing communism" (25). Such constructions helped Americans justify their continuing commitments to those southern Vietnamese fleeing their homeland.

In fact, terminology is a key part of this story, and Demmer carefully explains the problems that arise when we conflate labels like "refugee" and "migrant" (even "dependent" was a contested term during evacuation calculations) and the legal implications of applying such labels imprecisely. We also see differences between "humanitarian" and "human rights." Even phrases like "normalization" were debated for decades. And, of course, concerns over U.S. "credibility" remained as persuasive as they had been when American policymakers first considered sending ground combat troops to support a tenuous ally back in the mid-1960s. Finally, perceptions of the United States' "loss" in Vietnam and ideas about how best to compensate for such a dissatisfying outcome linger just below the surface.

Demmer also highlights the many competing organizations disputing where the United States' "moral obligation" lay after Saigon's fall. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association

(FVPPA) and the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia came to different conclusions on the U.S. government's primary responsibilities. Demmer adds an international component to these debates by showing how the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and nations of first asylum like Thailand believed the United States should take responsibility for resolving the mass migration from Vietnam. Here the importance of human rights to President Jimmy Carter's foreign policy approach enters the story. Demmer argues, persuasively, that the new administration reframed U.S.-SRV relations in ways that influenced how subsequent commanders-in-chief would approach, if not define, normalization.

Washington legislators mattered too, especially as more U.S. military veterans began entering Congress and served alongside legislators like Senator Ted Kennedy—legislators who were advocating more broadly for human rights on an international scale. It is worth noting that former prisoners of war like Senator John S. McCain and Congressman "Pete" Peterson, the first U.S. ambassador to the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, helped lead the charge for normalization while prudently offering their support to the National League of POW/MIA Families. The power of Congress is certainly on display in *After Saigon's Fall*, and one wonders if, given our increasingly imperial presidency, similar leverage will ever be wielded so deftly again in foreign policy debates.

This is not to say that the executive branch lacked influence over normalization and refugee policy decisions. Demmer explicitly shows how presidents made key decisions in these decades. Ford, Carter, and Reagan all shaped, in their own ways, U.S. policies toward Hanoi and commitments to former South Vietnamese allies and their families. Carter, for instance, had to balance his personal impulses on human rights with Cold War considerations like a deteriorating relationship with the Soviet Union and a Third Indochina War pitting Vietnam against Cambodia. The genocidal policies of the Khmer Rouge did little to alleviate Southeast Asian refugee problems. Still, Carter set an example on human rights standards that his successors ultimately would follow. As Demmer notes, "US policy makers insisted that Hanoi had to meet an expanding number of preconditions prior to the assumption of official ties" (92).

Not unexpectedly, Ronald Reagan looms large in part II, as Demmer moves her story into the 1980s. Yet entities outside of Washington could, and often did, proscribe White House actions as policymakers continued to focus on the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees. Advocacy groups supporting Amerasian children certainly were among these influential nongovernment agencies. So too were those families invested in a "full accounting" of American POW/MIAs. The myth of prisoners of war still alive in Southeast Asia proved a potent elixir, despite zero evidence of their existence. Demmer illustrates how POW/MIA accounting successfully competed for politicians' attention, even while they framed Vietnamese migration programs as "family-reunification based humanitarian initiatives" that allowed them to "score propaganda points in the short term" (127). The cultural pressures exerted by "Rambomania" in the mid-1980s make for entertaining yet exasperating reading.

It is important to note, however, that this is not simply an American-centric story. Demmer showcases organizations like the FVPPA, which set up bases of operation in Vietnamese communities like Fall Church, Virginia. Among the more insightful arguments in this work is that while policymakers sought to divide "humanitarian" considerations from "political" ones, the two merged thanks in no small part to advocacy groups like the FVPPA. Its president, Khúc Minh Tho, is a central player here. For over a decade she advocated on behalf of parents separated from their children. Demmer notes

the gendered ways in which narratives about the FVPPA unfolded, as supporters concentrated on Tho's identity as a woman, a "kitchen-table activist," as much as the cause she was championing. Of course, helping reunite mothers with their children was a low-risk enterprise for wary politicians concerned about how best to confront normalization with a communist country.

All these grassroots, nongovernmental initiatives not only unfolded alongside high-level talks between Washington and Hanoi, but in many ways helped to shape them. As Demmer presents it, humanitarian concerns became policy aims. By the final portions of *After Saigon's Fall*, it is easy to embrace the author's argument that "frequent contact and cooperation between Hanoi and Washington on humanitarian issues advanced the political relationship by establishing institutional, personal, and operational ties" (158). When President Bill Clinton announced the "normalization of diplomatic relations with Vietnam" on July 11, 1995, the proclamation might have been seen as a victory for "transnational advocacy" as much as it was for domestic Washington politics.

Yet despite the influence of these nongovernmental advocates, what is striking is how much power the defeated nation retained after America's war in Vietnam ended. Demmer implies that the United States was able to bend Hanoi to its will well beyond the mid-1970s, with far greater success than before the signing of the 1973 Paris Peace Accords. This is a story of Vietnamese compliance as much as it is one of U.S.-SRV cooperation. One gets a sense that, especially as the Cold War came to a close, Hanoi lost much of its ability to choose how best to proceed toward an official reconciliation with its former enemy. Demands from Washington—on facilitating family reunifications or on cooperation with the migration of reeducation camp detainees—arguably held sway because the United States retained tremendous global influence despite losing its war in Vietnam.

Individual human stories matter. But so too do bureaucratic and organizational ones. Demmer shines in tying these seemingly disparate threads together and, bringing to light the competing voices that were all seeking to determine the United States' moral obligations in an ugly war's aftermath. Perhaps this is the greatest strength of *After Saigon's Fall*.

Viet Thanh Nguyen's reaction to *Miss Saigon* suggests that elements of the long American war in Vietnam remain with us today: the racism, the sexism, the unquestioned assumptions of American superiority and righteousness. In many ways, Amanda Demmer is implying the same thing. She provides us with an excellent survey of what may not yet even be the "final stage" of the war in Vietnam, a war that continues to have an extraordinary impact on both Vietnamese and American lives.

Notes:

1. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Close the Curtain on 'Miss Saigon,'" *New York Times*, 3 August 2019.
2. Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (New York, 2019), 231; Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (New York, 1989); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York, 2015); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Andrew X. Pham, *The Eaves of Heaven: A Life in Three Wars* (New York, 2008).
3. Yêñ Lê Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refuge(es)* (Oakland, CA, 2014), 6, 7.
4. Mary L. Dudziak, *War Time: An Idea, Its History, Its Consequences* (Oxford, UK, 2012).
5. Carl J. Bon Tempo, *Americans at the Gate: The United States and Refugees during the Cold War* (Princeton, 2008); Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (Amherst, MA, 2007).

Learning From History That We Learn Nothing from History . . . And Some Other Thoughts¹

Pierre Asselin

After *Saigon's Fall: Refugees and US-Vietnamese Relations, 1975–2000* is a smart and compelling analysis of the process that culminated in the normalization of diplomatic relations between Hanoi and Washington two decades after the end of the so-called Vietnam War. As its author points out, this more recent history has been largely overlooked. After the Vietnamese communist victory and reunification of the country under Hanoi's sole aegis, Americans did their best to put the war—and Vietnam itself—behind them. Diplomatic historians, for their part, never moved past it. They remained fixated on elucidating its origins, evolution, and ending. Although the post-1975 period is rich in interactions between officials from the United States and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRVN), as Amanda Demmer masterfully demonstrates, few historians have engaged it.²

"In more ways than one, then, the United States continued to fight the Vietnam War through non-military means" long after Saigon fell, Demmer maintains (214). That contention, on the surface of it, echoes the theme and substance of Edwin Martini's *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000*.³ According to the latter, after 1975 the United States waged a nasty, unforgiving "war by other means" intended to weaken and humiliate SRVN authorities and thus avenge America's own weakening and humiliation at the hands of those authorities during the previous decade. Key players included members of Congress, the National League of Families of American Prisoners and Missing in Southeast Asia, and the Prisoner of War [POW]/Missing-in-Action [MIA] lobby. This postwar war did not end until the U.S.-Vietnam Trade Council and other pro-business groups curtailed the lobby's nefarious influence, setting the stage for the normalization of diplomatic relations in 1995.

As it turns out, Demmer's analysis and conclusions differ vastly from Martini's. The real war was largely over the fate of refugees from Vietnam. It was spearheaded by U.S.-based non-governmental actors and congressional leaders, admittedly, but not those Martini identifies. Moral rather than punitive considerations shaped their actions. Lastly, despite some hostility, a great deal of cooperation and goodwill marked U.S.-SRVN relations after 1975.

After Saigon's Fall consists of three parts. The first considers U.S. policy between 1975 and 1980; the second explores preliminary steps toward normalization taken in the 1980s; and the last sheds light on U.S.-SRVN relations between 1989 and 2000. The central theme of the book is that non-executive actors in the United States shaped the course of U.S.-SRVN relations after 1975 and, in doing so, expedited the postwar reconciliation process between the two former adversaries.

These actors' activism, Demmer contends, "dictated much of the scope and pace of this larger process" (19). They were the primary driving force behind Washington's adoption of such policies and programs as the Orderly Departure Program (1979), the Amerasian Immigration Act (1982), the Amerasian Homecoming Act (1987), Humanitarian Operation (1989), the Comprehensive Plan of Action (1989), Resettlement Opportunities for Vietnamese Returnees (1996), and the McCain amendment (1996). Thus, although U.S.-SRVN relations appeared frozen through much of the 1980s, the two governments were actually establishing meaningful behind-the-scenes contacts to implement humanitarian policies and programs. By engaging in intensive, protracted, and productive bargaining, Hanoi and Washington were paving the way for normalization with "personal, institutional, and

governmental links" (128).

The core protagonist in Demmer's story is Khu Minh Tho, a Vietnamese refugee who founded the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) shortly after her arrival in the United States. Her travails and her advocacy were critical in shaping the response of the U.S. government to Vietnamese refugees, including Amerasian children and reeducation camp detainees, seeking asylum and/or family reunification in the United States.

In more ways than one, Demmer relates the evolution of U.S.-SRVN relations after 1975 through the experiences of Tho and her organization. The latter two figure prominently in every chapter, lending credibility to the author's argument that non-governmental organizations proved most influential in conditioning the pertinent policies of the executive branch. In relating Tho's story as she does, Demmer rightly restores agency to southern Vietnamese who "have suffered erasure" (3) from history in both the United States and Vietnam. In that respect, her findings are consistent with Martini's. He concluded that the Vietnamese had been "erased or, at the very least, marginalized in American cultural memory" after 1975.⁴

In addition to the above, *After Saigon's Fall* offers revealing insights on postwar reeducation camps in the SRVN and the experiences of detainees; the composition and influence of the POW/MIA lobby in the United States; the matter of live POWs in Vietnam and what Demmer cleverly calls "Rambomania"; and some of the ramifications of Vietnam's prolonged occupation of Cambodia. The book also explains that although President Richard Nixon had secretly promised Hanoi \$2.5 billion in grant aid over five years in 1973, "the actual postwar transfer of funds ran the other direction" (214), as the United States never honored its promise, and Hanoi accepted responsibility for loans owed by the defunct Republic of Vietnam (RVN, or South Vietnam) to American citizens and companies.

While building a persuasive case for the centrality of moral and humanitarian concerns, Demmer acknowledges that pragmatic considerations also shaped the thinking of U.S. decision-makers. That is, she recognizes the politicization and exploitation of the Vietnamese refugee crisis to validate President Ronald Reagan's claim that "the Vietnam War had been a 'noble cause' all along" (4), on the one hand, and the U.S.-led international effort to isolate and punish Vietnam for its occupation of Cambodia, on the other. To be sure, détente started to unravel just as the Vietnamese refugee crisis began. The same year Saigon fell to communist armies, European and North American governments signed the Helsinki Final Act. Shortly thereafter, U.S. and allied governments began using the civil rights portion of the agreement to discredit communist regimes and Marxism-Leninism generally on moral grounds.

The weaponization of human rights became a hallmark of Washington's foreign policy starting in the late 1970s. Against this backdrop, refugee outflows from Vietnam legitimated claims by U.S. policymakers about the "evils of communism" and the inability of Marxist-Leninist regimes to provide for their own people. The reign of terror by the genocidal Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese War, and Vietnam's decade-long occupation of Cambodia were self-inflicted and arguably lethal blows to Asian communism, as Pierre Grosser has magisterially shown.⁵ All these events played into the hands of U.S. decision-makers, who helped make these circumstances a reality. In a brilliant conclusion, Demmer affirms that U.S. decision-makers and the non-executive actors who

"tirelessly advocated for POWs/MIAs, Amerasians, and reeducation camp detainees" ultimately "adopted the same causes for decidedly different reasons" (128).

The main shortcoming of *After Saigon's Fall* is Demmer's cursory consideration of Vietnamese communist agency and the factors that informed Hanoi's foreign policy in this period. Contrary to what the subtitle indicates, this is not a book about U.S.-Vietnamese relations; it is about U.S. relations vis-à-vis Vietnam, about U.S.-based actors' perspectives on U.S.-SRVN relations. Heavily accentuating those U.S.-based actors and their influence, the narrative variously marginalizes and trivializes Hanoi.

To illustrate, Demmer argues that Washington pushed the SRVN into the arms of the Soviet Union in 1978 by failing to respond to its "repeated goodwill gestures." Hanoi, she writes, "made it clear" earlier that year "that it was willing to pursue rapid normalization [with Washington] without precondition." Unfortunately, U.S. National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski's "Cold War logic carried the day," and, as a result, the SRVN joined the Soviet-led Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (76-77).

From a position of carefully balanced neutrality between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China (PRC), Hanoi started moving closer to Moscow back in 1968, after Beijing criticized its decision to enter into peace talks with Washington in Paris. The Sino-Vietnamese split shaped Hanoi's behavior to no insignificant degree thereafter. Its pursuit of closer alignment with Moscow, culminating in the signing of the Soviet-Vietnamese Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation in November 1978, had more to do with that and other considerations than it did with the United States.

Recently, political scientist Kosal Path suggested that domestic concerns factored particularly prominently in the strategic thinking of Vietnamese communist policymakers for much of the first decade of the postwar/post-reunification era.⁶ Indeed, that decade was extremely challenging for the SRVN and its people. The so-called subsidy period (*thời kỳ bao cấp*, 1975-1986) was marked by food and commodity shortages as well as deeply flawed fiscal, economic, and other policies. Like some of their contemporaries in the Third World, including the PRC, Le Duan and his comrades had been ingenious in wartime but proved inept in peacetime. Hanoi had compelling reasons of its own to formally align with the Soviets in 1978.

It also had its reasons for pursuing normalization of diplomatic relations with the United States later. In the 1980s, the SRVN became an international pariah, owing mainly to its refusal to pull its troops out of Cambodia. It was left with no real, desperately needed benefactors except the Soviet Union, upon which it became heavily dependent in several respects. Many Vietnamese at the time in fact wondered why they had fought French, Japanese, and then American imperialism, at the cost of millions of lives, only to become a Soviet neo-colony.

Then communism imploded in Eastern Europe, followed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union. At that point, Hanoi needed to normalize relations with the United States. At a minimum, it had to end the embargo and sanctions imposed on it by Washington since May 1975 and access American and allied capital and markets. The alternative was increased dependency on China, to which Hanoi turned after the Soviet Union disintegrated. But that was highly undesirable, given their shared history.

In fairness to Demmer, her neglect of Hanoi's agency has less to do with her diligence as a scholar—genuinely impressive—than the way we train historians of U.S.-Vietnam relations in this country. Doctoral advisers

The weaponization of human rights became a hallmark of Washington's foreign policy starting in the late 1970s. Against this backdrop, refugee outflows from Vietnam legitimated claims by U.S. policymakers about the "evils of communism" and the inability of Marxist-Leninist regimes to provide for their own people.

all too often fail to impress the critical importance of language skills upon their charges, doing them an immense disservice. Reading competency in English and Vietnamese is essential for studying and understanding the complexities and the symbiotic nature of U.S.-Vietnam relations during the global Cold War and beyond. Would we in the field of U.S. diplomatic history today abide scholars of U.S.-German relations who were incapable of engaging German-language sources?

The problem stems largely from the inexplicable prevalence of what I consider the Logevall School of Vietnam War Studies in the United States. In a piece published recently in the obscure *Texas National Security Review*, the Harvard professor and award-winning author of several works on the Vietnam War—who speaks not a word of Vietnamese that is not on a restaurant menu—and a colleague, Daniel Bessner, brazenly and unapologetically proclaimed that “the most important source material for explicating the formation and exercise of U.S. power (if not its effects) is located in presidential and other American archives.”⁷ For good measure, the two validated their argument against engaging Vietnamese and other foreign archives on the (condescending and elitist) grounds that the high cost of accessing foreign archives “reinforce[s] inequalities within the field” and favors “those at rich institutions” while “those at poor institutions suffer.”⁸

Until the early 1990s, one could be excused for heeding Logevall and Bessner’s counsel and engaging U.S.-Vietnamese relations using only Western documentary and other sources. But then two significant changes happened. First, Hanoi granted foreigners access to revealing portions of its governmental records, including those of the rival regime in Saigon (to say nothing of the other fascinating official and non-official sources available in Vietnam). Second, the government, universities, and other organizations in the United States started offering graduate students ample opportunities to study Vietnamese and the financial support to do so.⁹ Arguably, the most innovative, albeit not necessarily major-award-winning, English language scholarship on U.S.-Vietnam relations since then has been produced by U.S.-trained scholars who have mined archives in Vietnam relying on their own hard-learned Vietnamese language skills.¹⁰

Like many of her American peers wanting to make sense of U.S.-Vietnam relations during the global Cold War, Demmer cannot engage Vietnamese language materials because of language limitations. As a result, she unintentionally paints a one-sided picture of the relationship between Hanoi and the United States after 1975. No wonder, then, that her argument about U.S. obduracy precluding U.S.-SRVN normalization in 1978 resonates with the “missed opportunity” trope typical of U.S.-based scholarship on Vietnam, recycled by none other than Logevall himself in his Pulitzer Prize-winning book about the origins of American involvement in that country.¹¹ If only Washington had recognized Ho Chi Minh was a nationalist and not a communist . . . If only President Lyndon Johnson had agreed to negotiate with Hanoi earlier . . . If only President Nixon had not been a madman . . .

Logevall and like-minded proponents of the missed opportunity trope invariably attribute primary agency to Americans for the failure of Washington and Hanoi to get along after 1945. Most problematically, they presume that the Vietnamese communist mindset was consistently conciliatory even though (1) they have never researched that angle themselves, and (2) there is a growing body of English-language scholarship based on Vietnamese materials that attests to the ideological inflexibility and general intractability of Hanoi decision-makers.¹² This essentialization of a major Vietnamese actor occurs because Hanoi is rarely studied on its own terms, on the basis of its own historical records. It is perfectly acceptable for scholars

to study the Vietnam War and its legacies without engaging Vietnamese language sources. However, these scholars must have the humility to acknowledge the one-sided nature of their approach, if only to be fair to their readers and out of respect for those of us who study a different side.¹³

Notwithstanding these concerns, *After Saigon’s Fall* remains a consequential book and one of the most comprehensive accounts to date of the tumultuous American road to normalization of relations with the SRVN. Historians of the Vietnam War and the Cold War will find it informative as well as ideal for adoption in graduate seminars on a pertinent topic. It should also be on the bookshelves of U.S. decision-makers as a reminder of the old Churchillian adage – recycled from a George Santayana aphorism – that “Those that fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it.”

Notes:

1. I thank Edward Miller for reading a draft of this article and futilely—but probably wisely—suggesting I go in a different direction.
2. Notable book-length studies addressing post-1975 U.S.-Vietnam relations include Lewis M. Stern, *Defense Relations Between the United States and Vietnam: The Process of Normalization, 1977–2003* (Jefferson, NC, 2005); Cécile Menétrey-Monchau, *American-Vietnamese Relations in the Wake of War: Diplomacy After the Capture of Saigon, 1975–1979* (Jefferson, NC, 2006); Edwin A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (Amherst, MA, 2007); Patrick Hagopian, *The Vietnam War in American Memory: Veterans, Memorials, and the Politics of Healing* (Amherst, MA, 2009); Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009).
3. Martini, *Invisible Enemies*.
4. Martini, *Invisible Enemies*, 7.
5. Pierre Grosser, *L’Histoire du monde se fait en Asie: Une autre vision du XXe siècle* [World History Is Made in Asia: An Alternative Perspective on the 20th Century] (Paris, 2017).
6. Kosal Path, *Vietnam’s Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War* (Madison, WI, 2020).
7. Daniel Bessner and Fredrik Logevall, “Recentring the United States in the Historiography of American Foreign Relations,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020): 53.
8. Bessner and Logevall, “Recentring the United States,” 45. Many Vietnam War studies scholars have studied Vietnamese and made a name for themselves in the field despite attending and then teaching at “poor” colleges and universities. Logevall pursued his doctoral studies at Yale and went on to teach at Cornell before landing at Harvard; I attended the University of Hawaii and went on to teach at Kapiolani Community College, Chaminade University, and Hawaii Pacific University before arriving at San Diego State University. Logevall is the product of rich institutions as much as I am the product of poor ones. I think neither I nor my scholarship has “suffered” too greatly owing to my humble *cheminement*.
9. The Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute (SEASSI) at the University of Wisconsin-Madison accepts and financially supports a good number of both master’s and doctoral students intent on learning Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian languages for research purposes. I thank Grace Cheng and Cody Billock for suggesting these and other salient points iterated in this section.
10. That includes Vietnamese Americans, many of whom know how to speak but not how to read and write Vietnamese.
11. Fredrik Logevall, *Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America’s Vietnam* (New York, 2014).
12. See Lien-Hang Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2012); Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954–1965* (Berkeley, CA, 2014); Tuong Vu, *Vietnam’s Communist Revolution: The Power and Limits of Ideology* (Cambridge, UK, 2016); and Christopher Goscha, *Vietnam: A New History* (New York, 2016).
13. To Edwin Martini’s credit, the full title of his *Invisible Enemies* makes clear his approach is U.S.-centered.

Review of Amanda C. Demmer, *After Saigon's Fall: Refugees and U.S.-Vietnamese Relations, 1975–2000*

Kathryn C. Statler

Amanda Demmer presents us with an entirely new way of looking at U.S.-Vietnamese relations after 1975. She begins by pointing out that the iconic image of an American helping South Vietnamese into a helicopter on the rooftop of 22 Gia Long Street before Saigon's fall on April 30, 1975, can be reinterpreted. Instead of simply representing the tragic and dishonorable end of the U.S. military effort in Vietnam, this moment also symbolizes the beginning of a new saga. In one of the largest migrations of the late twentieth century, over one million South Vietnamese would eventually resettle in the United States, and during that migration the United States and Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) would slowly pursue a process of normalization.

Indeed, in 230 elegantly written and exceedingly well-researched pages, Demmer demonstrates how these two processes—migration and normalization—were intimately linked. She focuses on three groups of South Vietnamese: the “boat people” with family or wartime connections in the United States, those suffering in the re-education camps (many of whom were Army of the Republic of Vietnam [ARVN] soldiers), and the 30,000–50,000 Amerasian children left behind (6).¹ She also examines how, in grappling with these three groups, the United States and SRV governments eventually normalized relations, which she defines as developing formal economic relations, establishing formal diplomatic ties, and securing the ability to respond to bilateral and international issues without major incident (3). Finally, the author focuses on how members of Congress and nonstate actors such as the Citizens Commission on Indochinese Refugees (CCIR), the Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA), and the Aurora Foundation played a critical role in shaping how U.S. policy evolved toward the refugees and the SRV.

To illuminate this evolution, Demmer divides the book into three distinct sections. Part I looks at U.S. policy from 1975 to 1980. Part II dives into the beginning of the normalization process in the 1980s. Part III focuses on U.S.-Vietnamese relations from 1989 to 2000. The book is a most welcome addition to what is still a relatively thin body of scholarship on the postwar period, and it is undoubtedly the definitive study on the complex, intertwined processes of U.S.-SRV normalization and South Vietnamese migration to the United States.²

In Part I, Demmer argues that the refugee crisis was instrumental in shaping U.S. foreign policy in the 1975–1980 period. President Gerald Ford ensured that the South Vietnamese were included in Saigon's evacuation during April 1975. Here, Demmer pushes back against much of the literature and the officials who have castigated U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Graham Martin, arguing that his planning was “more nuanced” than he has been given credit for and that he allowed covert evacuation attempts. The administration also “trickled out” Americans in Saigon to evacuate as many South Vietnamese as possible with them (41–42).³

After April 30, Ford insisted that the United States still had a moral obligation to help loyal South Vietnamese, and he campaigned to persuade Americans not to forget them. As a result of his efforts, Congress passed the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act of 1975 (49–50). Demmer also illuminates the key role that the CCIR, which had major ties to the government and to the humanitarian International Rescue Committee (IRC), played in galvanizing Congress to act on the refugee situation. They ultimately gave us the Refugee Act of 1980, which ensured that the White House and Congress would continue to

work together on refugee policy (71–93).

Demmer notes that during this period, the United States took a new step toward multilateralism by working with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on the 1979 Orderly Departure Program. She deftly demonstrates how presidential action, congressional impulses, and non-government actors facilitated South Vietnamese migration, but she makes it clear that between 1975 and 1979, the outcome of these efforts was uncertain, as it was undetermined whether the United States would step up and provide serious financial resources and resettlement programs in concert with the UNHCR. By 1980, however, the United States had expanded its commitment to the South Vietnamese. Yet it still heavily criticized the SRV for human rights violations—an irony, given the destructiveness of the U.S. war effort in Vietnam, that Demmer points out repeatedly.

Part II highlights the role of advocacy groups such as Khuc Minh Tho's FVPPA, which became one of the most powerful Vietnamese American NGOs in the country. The FVPPA pushed the U.S. government toward an ever-increasing commitment to resettling South Vietnamese refugees between 1980 and 1989. Demmer also pays close attention to Ginetta Sagan's Aurora Foundation, which shined a spotlight on SRV human rights abuses. Such non-governmental advocacy played a huge role in shaping public opinion during this period, as POW/MIA, Amerasian, and reeducation advocates “all engaged in information and image politics by mobilizing new evidence during the early 1980s that helped make their causes more visible and compelling” (101). These “kitchen table activists,” who were primarily women, had a profound influence on U.S.-SRV relations (108).

As a result of these advocacy groups, SRV and U.S. officials remained in almost constant communication over how to transport reeducation camp detainees, Amerasian children, and boat people to the United States. Although President Ronald Reagan followed his predecessors in economically isolating Vietnam and insisting that normalization could not occur while Vietnamese troops occupied Cambodia, he needed Vietnamese cooperation on refugee resettlement. Demmer details the ins and out of this ongoing dialogue in chapter 4. Eventually the two sides signed an accord on U.S. POW/MIA operations in Vietnam and reached a bilateral agreement on Amerasian processing and a joint resolution on re-education camp detainees (160).

Part III examines how the groundwork laid from 1975 to 1979 and from 1980 to 1989 would pay even greater dividends in the 1990s, ultimately leading to U.S.-SRV normalization and to the resettlement of over a million refugees in the United States. Organizations such as the FVPPA and Aurora Foundation followed up on previous successes and helped achieve a 1989 bilateral agreement, Humanitarian Operation (HO), which offered a path to resettlement outside regular channels for reeducation detainees. More than 167,000 people traveled through that program (176–81).

Ginetta Sagan continued to update her report on the SRV's violations of human rights, using interviews with refugees to highlight the problem. As the plight of refugees thus returned front and center to public awareness, more high-level meetings began occurring between U.S. and SRV officials, with Secretary of State James Baker and SRV Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach meeting for the first time in New York in 1990. After this meeting, the United States presented a “Roadmap to U.S.-SRV Normalization” in 1991, which focused on resolving the two major sticking points, the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia and the POW/MIA accounting. These obstacles vanished in 1992 with SRV troop removal from Cambodia and the George H.W. Bush administration's dismissal of the National

League of POW/MIA Families' unsupported claims that American POWs were still being held in Vietnam.⁴

President Bill Clinton was more low-key than Bush in dismissing the league, possibly because of his own ambiguous record during the Vietnam War, but he was supported by prominent Vietnam War veterans John McCain, John Kerry, and Pete Peterson, who all rejected the living POWs myth. By way of contrast, McCain was very responsive to the lobbying efforts of Vietnamese American NGOs. In 1996 he introduced the McCain amendment to re-establish the eligibility of unmarried adult children of former detainees for refugee status, thereby demonstrating once again the incredibly influential role of the FVPPA in helping shape U.S. government policy (222).

The strengths of this book are many. Demmer delivers on her promise to examine the ways in which Congress reasserted itself into U.S. foreign policy post-1975 (19). As she writes, "By passing resolutions that became institutionalized in US policy, forming influential committees, corresponding privately with Vietnamese leaders, sending delegations to Vietnam, making speeches, and fomenting domestic constituencies, legislators both accelerated US-Vietnamese ties and erected barriers to further normalization" (196). I would have enjoyed a bit more detail on congressional influence between 1975 and 1979, as there is less focus there than on the latter periods.

One of the most impressive aspects of the book is the way Demmer weaves together the actions of congressional members with the other major players in the process of normalization. Her focus on well-known UN, non-profit humanitarian, and human rights groups such as the UNHCR, CCIR, and National League of POW/MIA Families is complemented by her detailed recounting and analysis of Khuc Minh Tho's personal story about what led her to form the FVPPA and Ginetta Sagan's continued evolution in her views on human rights, which resulted in the Aurora Foundation. Khuc Minh Tho and Ginetta Sagan are clearly the heroines in this story.

Demmer's analysis of various groups' influence, whether congressional members, high-ranking North Vietnamese and American officials, presidents, or non-governmental groups provides us with a nuanced and complex picture of the process of normalization during each of the three periods she examines. She also delicately balances her analysis of U.S. policy toward Hanoi and South Vietnamese refugees, arguing that only by understanding this trilateral relationship can we understand the process of reconciliation (227). The result for South Vietnamese refugees included initiatives designed to support their resettlement from 1982, 1984, 1987, 1988, 1989, and 1996; and, for Hanoi, the normalizing of relations by 1995.

In addition, although the author spends a refreshing amount of time examining other perspectives, she is clear on the role of presidential action. She focuses perhaps most on Ronald Reagan, who concentrated on POW/MIA issues; but she also details Ford's determination to include South Vietnamese in the U.S. evacuation; points out the contradiction in Jimmy Carter's human rights rhetoric and his reluctance to admit Vietnamese refugees; remarks upon George H.W. Bush's shift away from a "full accounting"; and notes Clinton's openness to full economic and diplomatic relations. She also reminds us that Vietnam never ranked in the top five security issues after April 30, 1975 (230).

I would argue that of the five presidents discussed in the book, Ronald Reagan receives the most flattering appraisal, as his focus on the evils of communism led him to a progressive immigration policy not always in

keeping with the Republican Party platform. He signed the Amerasian Immigration Act of 1982 and also made an effort to take in more re-education camp detainees. As Demmer notes, Reagan's goals coincided with those of the FVPPA and Aurora Foundation (128).

Demmer also clearly outlines how the United States continued to fight the war through non-military means, instating economic embargos, refusing to make good on promised U.S. funds to rebuild Vietnam or to allow SRV entry into the United Nations, and insisting on \$208 million in postwar concessions from the SRV and a full account of missing Americans.⁵ But ultimately, she writes, "while the United States perpetuated hostilities with formal economic and diplomatic policies," the two nations collaborated "on humanitarian issues, especially migration programs," and those "became the primary means of postwar reconciliation" (232). She notes that the U.S. language on humanitarianism and human rights with respect to the South Vietnamese population, which helped lead to the normalization of U.S.-

SVR relations, played a significant role in putting human rights front and center as the moral *lingua franca* of twenty-first century international relations (233).

I have very few criticisms of Demmer's book. However, I would have welcomed additional details on the North Vietnamese perspective. Granted, such an undertaking would have made for a much longer book, but a deeper discussion of Prime Minister Pham Van Dong's or Foreign Minister Thach's thinking as they grappled with U.S. demands would

have created more balance in the analysis of the U.S.-SRV process of normalization. The SRV's reasoning remains obscure. Along similar lines, I would have enjoyed more detail on the role the myth of orphaned Amerasians played in prompting government action and on the shift from originally counting 244 POW/MIAs to the estimate of 2,500 that arose in the 1980s. Finally, and this is not a critique per se, it would have been very interesting to (briefly) compare what happened during the 1975 South Vietnamese refugee crisis with the U.S. assessment of its moral obligation during the 1954-55 North Vietnamese refugee crisis, along with congressional action and the role non-government actors played during that period.

Certainly, Demmer has reshaped my thinking on the process of U.S.-SRV normalization, as I too have mostly focused on the miraculous 1990s, with Bill Clinton's ending of the economic embargo, the appointment of former POW Pete Peterson as ambassador to Vietnam and Clinton's triumphant trip to Vietnam in 2000. As Demmer makes clear throughout the book, these events were the culmination of a long, nuanced process that began in 1975 and that came about only because of congressional and non-governmental actions, as well as a prolonged dialogue between the SRV and United States. I can think of no higher compliment than to say that the contents of this book will reshape how I teach the post-1975 period.

Finally, Demmer's book is intriguing in one other respect. It could serve as the template for how the United States will handle Afghanistan. In other words, perhaps we should not view August 30, 2021, when the last U.S. flight left Kabul, as an end point but rather as a beginning. Given current media reporting, White House pronouncements, and congressional investigations, it is not a stretch to posit that the United States will carry out its new forever war by using economic embargoes, tarring the Taliban-led government as major human rights violators, and then negotiating with that same government to resettle tens of thousands of Afghan citizens to the United States. As the French say, *on verra bien*. We will see.

Notes:

1. The boat people are those who took a naval route out of South Vietnam in the months and years following the fall of Saigon. For studies on the postwar South Vietnamese experience and memory of the war, see, for example, Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); and Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York, 2018).
2. For studies examining U.S.-SRV relations and U.S. reckoning with the war, see, for example, George Herring, "The War That Never Seems to Go Away," in *The War That Never Ends: New Perspectives on the Vietnam War*, ed. David L. Anderson and John Ernst (Lexington, KY, 2014); Michael Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Christian Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York, 2016); Edwin Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975--2000* (Amherst, MA, 2007); and Robert Schulzinger, *A Time for Peace: The Legacy of the Vietnam War* (Oxford, UK, 2006).
3. See, for example, self-serving comments from former national security adviser and secretary of state Henry Kissinger and other U.S. officials in Rory Kennedy's documentary, *Last Days in Vietnam* (Moxie Firecracker Films, Brooklyn, NY, 2015), 98 mins., now available on YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpY7kkPAZc&t=1851s>. Martin is clearly made the scapegoat here; other government officials are allowed to continue to shirk responsibility forty years later.
4. See H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1995) for more on why the myth of live POWs proved so compelling.
5. Demmer acknowledges her reliance on Edwin Martini's *Invisible Enemies* here, especially his detailing of the U.S. continuation of the war through means other than military intervention.

It's Not Over Until It's Over

David L. Anderson

How and when do wars end? Politicians, journalists, and much of the public use historical analogies all the time but have only the most superficial understanding of this question. Most of us have seen the iconic pictures of the German surrender to General Dwight Eisenhower at Reims, the Japanese surrender to General Douglas MacArthur at Tokyo, and the U.S. military occupations that followed, but few wars end that way. The Korean War that began in 1950 has yet to formally end, and there is no iconic photo of the ceasefire signing at Panmunjom in 1954. The unaccomplished end of that war is represented now by a bizarrely divided building astride the demarcation line between the two Koreas.

On the cover of *After Saigon's Fall*, Amanda Demmer's astute contribution to the literature on the end of the Vietnam War, is the immediately recognizable photograph of a U.S. Marine Corps helicopter lifting evacuees off a Saigon rooftop in April 1975. This iconic photo, like those from the 1940s, marks the final hours of a war, as the last Americans and a few South Vietnamese allies made their exit from South Vietnam. Demmer's book is of unquestionable value now, as the world witnesses the end of what became America's longest war, the almost twenty-year conflict in Afghanistan.¹

The United States lost the Vietnam War but was not a defeated nation. World War II was a military and moral triumph for the United States against global fascism and militarism. The Korean War was a stalemate in a conflict purportedly about ideology, but more accurately about a global big-power rivalry between the Soviet Union and the United States through a limited proxy war. After that war, and especially with the end of the U.S.-Soviet Cold War, Washington chose several times to go to war, in each case claiming to defend U.S. national interests but with only a weak alignment of those interests with the local interests of peoples already engaged in violent struggles.

Without reviewing all these conflicts, it should be noted

that the U.S. military intervention in the internal war in Vietnam was controversial from the beginning. The Persian Gulf War of 1990–91 marked a laudable American defense of an ally against overt aggression, but was cut short in part to avoid the domestic turmoil that the prolonged Vietnam War had created. The war in Afghanistan began as a focused effort to protect Americans from the international criminals who had wreaked havoc on Americans on September 11, 2001.

In what were some of the worst public policy decisions in American history, Washington under-resourced the operations in Afghanistan, decided to define the Al-Qaeda murderers as political actors rather than the vicious thugs they were, and then launched a war in Iraq on questionable grounds against a despicable tyrant who had little ability to threaten the United States directly. The details of these wars vary widely, but collectively they were American failures. Responsibility for their origins, conduct, and continuance was not limited to particular presidential administrations. Pundits and politicians who might be quick to draw parallels between the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan and the exit from Vietnam would do well to keep this caveat in mind.

It is a mark of the excellence of *After Saigon's Fall* that Demmer's argument and conclusions resonate well beyond the Vietnam War itself. The war transitioned in 1975 from military operations to political and social reorganization, as many conflicts do. Often the two sides in a war either become exhausted by the pain and cost, or the original rationales for fighting change or disappear and lead to revised cost/benefit calculations for the antagonists. In the case of Vietnam, internal American politics and reassessments of global strategy in Washington led the Nixon administration to end the American intervention and withdraw U.S. forces with a "decent interval," if possible, before Hanoi assumed full control of the country.

Under the hardened discipline of "paramount leader" Le Duan, the Politburo had proved willing to accept hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese casualties in order to outlast the powerful American military.² When the shooting stopped and one flag flew over all of Vietnam, the newly named Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) remained paranoid about much of its own population and faced the daunting task of rebuilding after years of high-technology warfare. The SRV also wanted "normalization," which in its view meant moving forward with the United States and other nations as a self-sustainable and self-governing state—but with economic assistance, which U.S. officials rejected as a demand for reparations (64).

Washington had its own wounds to heal. To salvage its pride, and despite having inflicted so much pain on Vietnam, it refused to help Hanoi. Instead, it avoided examining its own responsibility for the war and began what would be two decades of economic and political isolation of the SRV to punish it for winning. From the mid-1970s to the early 1980s, many Americans wanted no public discussion of the war at all. As Demmer so well puts it, "Normalization was a process, not a moment, and a highly contentious, often contradictory process at that" (19).

There are numerous contributions in the monograph to our understanding of the ongoing tension—indeed, it was war by other means—between Washington and Hanoi after 1975, but this volume notably moves the discussion from narrow studies of single issues, such as POW/MIA accountability, to an integrated analysis of the broad range of forces shaping the course toward normalization. Especially important is the author's focus on the role of what she labels "nonexecutive" actors (14).

Foreign policy analysis often centers on the executive branch because that is where final foreign policy decisions usually occur. Many general histories of the American war in Vietnam limit their accounts of the postwar years to

White House demands that Hanoi be held fully accountable for all U.S. prisoners and servicemen missing-in-action and that the SRV end its intervention in Cambodia.

Presidents from Ford to Clinton took identifiable positions on normalization for various strategic and political reasons, and Demmer also addresses those. She is most original, however, in her discussions of grassroots movements like Khuc Minh Tho's Families of Vietnamese Political Prisoners Association (FVPPA) and Ginetta Sagan's Aurora Foundation. They and others lobbied effectively for "family reunification" on behalf of former South Vietnamese soldiers and officials in political reeducation camps, Amerasian children, and refugees and asylum seekers in camps and adrift. Their persistence kept humanitarian imperatives alive and eventually broke through the executive policy process (107).

Demmer underscores that it was women who facilitated the lobbying that put pressure on American officialdom, which was largely male. General accounts of this period also note the bipartisan congressional efforts of Vietnam veterans in the Senate—John Kerry, John McCain, and Pete Peterson—but Demmer expands the description of this work to include many additional legislators, as well as mid-level bureaucrats. The part of this complex account that is most enlightening is how human rights and humanitarianism became intertwined and were transformed into political power in ways that shaped policy at the time and foreshadowed the global refugee policies of the twenty-first century.

Demmer plows fruitful new ground with her use of FVPPA records and Aurora Foundation reports, and the contrast she draws between the respected status of these organizations by 1995 and the vastly diminished influence of the National League of POW/MIA Families is striking. The league benefited from the myth of living American prisoners (refuted many times by reputable studies) that began with Richard Nixon's exploitation of the anguish of the families of missing servicemen to fashion political cover for his decent interval exit tactic. Demmer cites to good effect Bruce Franklin's excellent research on the "purposely designed" myth and its accompanying "false hopes" (52).³

Ford and the presidents who followed him privately acknowledged the truth but would not publicly challenge the myth and risk political backlash. The perpetuation of the myth and the "Rambomania" (popular Hollywood fantasies of POW rescues) of the Reagan era in the 1980s that Demmer describes so well impeded but, as she reveals, did not prevent the necessary communication with Hanoi on prisoners and other issues that led finally to normalization (134).

Most Americans no longer remember the origins and various expressions of the myth, but Nixon's fabrication has become so embedded in American civic rites that the POW/MIA flag adopted by the league in 1972 now flies daily over all prominent federal buildings. Its display was required by a 2019 law cosponsored by the otherwise unlikely combination of Democratic senator Elizabeth Warren and Republican senator Tom Cotton.⁴ The law honors Americans of all wars who became prisoners or remain missing, but Demmer's insightful monograph reaffirms the important work historians have done to keep faith with facts.

Nixon's exploitation of the big lie about secret POWs was not the first example of intentional political prevarication and paranoid politics. The post-Civil War Lost Cause doctrine and 1950s McCarthyism are examples of such myth creation, and the practice reappeared to devastating effect after the 2020 presidential election. The POW myth became part of the revisionist impulse to argue that the war was not over and, in fact, could have been won. Preparing to search for POWs, fictional movie warrior John Rambo asks his commanding officer, "Sir, do we get to win this time?"⁵

By promoting the idea that Hanoi continued to violate human rights by secretly holding American prisoners and abusing Republic of Vietnam detainees in political reeducation camps, Reagan was able, as Demmer notes, "to rebrand the Vietnam War as a 'noble cause'" (138). She makes the perceptive observation that ironically, by the 1980s the leaders in Hanoi, once depicted by some antiwar Americans as romantic revolutionaries, were labeled war criminals; while South Vietnam's soldiers and officials, whom many had characterized as corrupt, were victims. The prolongation of the normalization process in all the ways Demmer describes contributed to an American "win thesis" that did not accept defeat in Vietnam and enabled so-called "better war" advocates to distort the Vietnam experience and to try and to fail again in Afghanistan and Iraq.⁶

As Demmer so expertly details, getting out of war is often more difficult than getting in, and the exit process creates its own legacy. She makes the important point that Hanoi wanted normalization for its own reasons and on its own terms. She cannot address that side of the process, however, because the SRV will not allow researchers to explore the Politburo decisions documented in its archives. *After Saigon's Fall* masterfully recounts the American struggle to put the war to rest and is for now the authoritative study of U.S.-SRV normalization.

Notes:

1. The editors of the *Washington Post* published her insights from this book as the American evacuation of Kabul was still in progress. See Amanda C. Demmer, "With Afghanistan's fall, the U.S. confronts a moral necessity it faced before," *Washington Post*, August 16, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2021/08/16/afghanistan-falls-us-confronts-moral-necessity-it-faced-before/>.
2. Pierre Asselin, *Vietnam's American War: A History* (Cambridge, UK, 2018), 109–10.
3. Critics of H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America: How and Why Belief in Live POWs Has Possessed a Nation* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993), labeled it a heresy against the POW/MIA civic religion, but it is a solid scholarly indictment of the myth-makers and their subversive politics.
4. "National POW/MIA Flag Act Signed into Law," Senator Elizabeth Warren press release, November 8, 2019, <https://www.warren.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/national-pow/mia-flag-act-signed-into-law>.
5. *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, dir. by George Cosmatos (Culver City, CA: Tri-Star Pictures, 1985). For quotes see <https://screenrant.com/rambo-franchise-best-memorable-quotes/>.
6. David L. Anderson, *Vietnamization: Politics, Strategy, Legacy* (Lanham, MD, 2020), 133–34.

Author's Response

Amanda C. Demmer

It is incredibly gratifying to have scholars whose work I much admire offer reviews of my book. Thank you to the roundtable's participants for giving *After Saigon's Fall* such a close reading. That each reviewer offered such high praise is both extremely rewarding and humbling.

My primary goal in *After Saigon's Fall* was to demonstrate the centrality of migrants and migration programs to the U.S. approach to normalization. I argue that in the twenty years that formal relations remained suspended, the United States and Vietnam took tangible steps toward normalization by collaborating on what American officials called "humanitarian issues": migration programs and POW/MIA accounting. While the "full accounting" effort has been thoroughly and thoughtfully documented by Michael Allen and others, I sought to place that well-known aspect of U.S. policy alongside the less visible migration programs that were implemented not only in the late 1970s,

but in 1982, 1984, 1987, 1989, and 1996.¹

These programs facilitated the resettlement of over one million Vietnamese (in addition to hundreds of thousands of Laotians and Cambodians) in the two decades after 1975. While the United States acted unilaterally to parole 130,000 South Vietnamese into the country in the wake of Saigon's collapse, the vast majority of Vietnamese traveled through programs that required intensive multilateral and/or bilateral negotiations. These efforts, undertaken in consort with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Southeast Asian nations of first asylum, other resettlement nations, and Vietnam, led to multinational agreements on resettlement programs for the so-called "boat people" in 1979 and again in 1989. The UNHCR, Vietnam, and resettlement countries also created a path of emigration directly from Vietnam, the Orderly Departure Program (ODP).

American and Vietnamese officials also negotiated bilateral agreements. Washington and Hanoi implemented subprograms within the ODP for Amerasians and reeducation camp detainees and created a program that provided oceanic migrants who were repatriated to Vietnam with one more opportunity to apply for resettlement in the US. The frequent contact and, especially as time went on, the compromise and collaboration that these programs required became the basis upon which Washington and Hanoi pursued normalization.

I appreciate Greg Daddis's reflection that language is particularly important to my arguments in *After Saigon's Fall*. This is a key part of the book. I argue that U.S. officials adopted a very specific definition of "humanitarian" vis-à-vis Vietnam. American policymakers equated "humanitarian" in this context with issues that facilitated family reunification for Americans and South Vietnamese: migration programs and POW/MIA accounting. I show how even though we as scholars continue to differentiate between humanitarianism and human rights, the two concepts became linguistically, politically, and legally coupled in the late Cold War. I also posit that normalization is best understood as a highly contested process (not a moment when diplomatic relations are announced) during which war and peace often coexist. I demonstrate that debates about these concepts and others are crucial to understanding the particularities of U.S.-Vietnamese normalization and that their ramifications reverberated much more widely in U.S. politics and international relations in the late twentieth century. In many ways, then, *After Saigon's Fall* is about much more than the Vietnam War, as David Anderson observes.

As each of the reviewers explains, what I call "nonexecutive actors" form the crux of the book. I argue that alliances between U.S. officials (especially members of Congress) and nonstate actors help explain the surprising level of bipartisan support that underwrote migration programs for twenty years after 1975. Building on a thesis developed by critical refugee scholars, who emphasize that the South Vietnamese people persisted after the collapse of the South Vietnamese state, I suggest that the ties between the U.S. and South Vietnamese people also persisted—in all their asymmetrical complexity—beyond 1975.² I ultimately conclude that the only way to make sense of the profoundly contradictory policies that the United States adopted after the fall of Saigon is to understand that U.S. officials continued to treat the government in Hanoi and the South Vietnamese peoples as separate entities and implemented policies to address them both.

Both Pierre Asselin and Kathryn Statler seek additional information on Hanoi's perspective and motivations. My decision to foreground American actors and to rely on secondary sources when discussing Hanoi reflects my larger objectives.³ As I state in the fourth paragraph, "Uncovering the American approach to US-SRV normalization is the main task of this book" (3).

While pragmatic considerations like word count limitations factored into my choices, so too did the unexpected quantity and quality of the English-language sources available. In writing a book about (relatively) recent events, I initially worried that I might not find sufficient primary sources for a book-length project, but I ended with enough archival material to write several monographs. Many of the collections I consulted were unprocessed or had opened to researchers only a few years before I used them. In this combination of presidential, congressional, and nonstate archives I found nuanced stories—about both individuals and institutions, as Daddis notes—warranting full consideration in their own right. I look forward to reading a book that provides a detailed analysis of policymaking in Washington and Hanoi, a deep dive into the decades-long conversations that I call normalization.

My aspiration with *After Saigon's Fall* was to provide scaffolding that will help move the historiographic conversation in that direction by illuminating the U.S. side of the dialogue.

In calls for more information on this and other topics, the reviewers, who have each written multiple books on the Vietnam War, demonstrate that despite the field's prolific output, we still have much to learn about the war and its reverberations. It is an incredibly exciting time in the historiography of the Vietnam War

when the post-1975 period and refugee politics are receiving the scrutiny they deserve.⁴ I look forward to seeing where this exciting new wave of scholarship leads and am honored to be among its contributors.

Notes:

1. Michael J. Allen, *Until the Last Man Comes Home: POWs, MIAs, and the Unending Vietnam War* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2009); Edward A. Martini, *Invisible Enemies: The American War on Vietnam, 1975–2000* (Amherst, MA, 2007); H. Bruce Franklin, *M.I.A. or Mythmaking in America* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993).
2. Long T. Bui, *Returns of War: South Vietnam and the Price of Refugee Memory* (New York, NY, 2018); Phuong Tran Nguyen, *Becoming Refugee American: The Politics of Rescue in Little Saigon* (Urbana, IL, 2017); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA, 2016); Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley, CA, 2014).
3. One of the books Asselin references, political scientist Kosal Path's *Vietnam's Strategic Thinking during the Third Indochina War*, would have been an incredibly helpful resource in this regard, and I wish I had known about it when it was published last year. Also, while I did attend the language program Asselin mentions in his footnotes (the Southeast Asian Studies Summer institute [SEASSI]), it is fair to say that had I intended to do research in Vietnam, additional language study would have been necessary.
4. Jana Lipman, *In Camps: Vietnamese Refugees, Asylum Seekers, and Repatriates* (Oakland, CA, 2020); Sam Vong, "'Assets of War': Strategic Displacements, Population Movements, and the Uses of Refugees during the Vietnam War," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 39, no. 3 (Spring 2020): 75–100; Hang Thi Thu Le-Tormala, *Postwar Journeys: American and Vietnamese Transnational Peace Efforts Since 1975* (Lawrence, KS, 2021); Sabrina Thomas, *The Politics of Paternity and Responsibility for the Amerasians of Vietnam* (Lincoln, NE, 2021).