

Debating America's Vietnam War

Much of the historiographical debate on the Vietnam War has focused on the reasons behind American involvement in the conflict and the specific strategies and policies that led to the eventual withdrawal and communist victory. In short: why did the United States get involved in this conflict and why did Americans stay engaged for as long as they did?

One popular explanation stresses the role of bureaucratic inertia, the misreading of historical lessons and the lack of expertise on Indochina among American policy-makers. This viewpoint is exemplified, for example, in George Kahin's *Intervention* (New York, 1986). Others, most prominently the historian Gabriel Kolko in *Anatomy of a War* (New York, 1985), have stressed economic explanations. According to Kolko the United States intervened in Vietnam because it was trying to uphold its economic dominance over the Third World.

Another major controversy has to do with the American failure to 'win' in Vietnam. Two opposing viewpoints dominate the literature. On the one hand, many have argued that the United States could have won had it followed a different military strategy. In particular, such authors as Harry G. Summers, Jr. in *On Strategy: The Vietnam War in Context* (New York, 1981) have argued that the United States should simply have isolated and then invaded North Vietnam. Others, including the author of the most widely read survey of American involvement in Vietnam, George Herring, maintain that the strength of Vietnamese nationalism, the destructive American conduct of the war and the false premises of the containment doctrine lay at the heart of America's failure.