

**Record, Jeffrey. The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam.
Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998.**

Timothy J. Lomperis

Volume 20, numéro 1, spring 2000

URI : https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/jcs20_01br08

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1198-8614 (imprimé)

1715-5673 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Lomperis, T. J. (2000). Compte rendu de [Record, Jeffrey. The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998.] *Journal of Conflict Studies*, 20(1), 199–201.

Record, Jeffrey. *The Wrong War: Why We Lost in Vietnam*. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998.

The historiography of every war goes through three phases of initial orthodox accounts, a following wave of critical revisionist jeremiads, and a settling layer of more sober and analytical post-revisionist studies. As "the wrong war," Vietnam got the phases mixed up, with Frances FitzGerald's revisionist *Fire in the Lake* (1972) preceding General Westmoreland's most orthodox *A Soldier Reports* (1976). But the literature on the Vietnam War, still as voluminous as ever, has long since slid into a post-revisionist settling of accounts. Jeffrey Record's *The Wrong War* is one of the most sober and well-reasoned studies to be published in this last phase.

Rather than yet another history of the war, the book is a series of essays integrated into the theme of the causes of the American defeat. Record concludes that these causes boil down to four: first, a misinterpretation of the significance and nature of the struggle in Vietnam; second, an underestimation of the enemy's tenacity and fighting power; third, an overestimation of US political stamina and military effectiveness; and finally, an absence of a politically competitive South Vietnam.

This reviewer is not naturally inclined to agree with all of what Record has to say, but I cannot find any good reason to fault him for these four causes: neither for the causes themselves nor for their centrality to the basic components of the American defeat.

In developing his case, Record takes up seven subjects discussed in seven chapters. He looks first at "the reasons why" the US became involved in Vietnam, and second at the "stakes, stamina, and fighting power" in which he correctly asserts an asymmetry of will between Washington and Hanoi. Third, in the "war in the South," Record delivers a devastating critique of the American strategy of attrition. His fourth and fifth essays, on "the war against the North" and the "hollow client," are less convincing. Nevertheless, he redeems himself in his sixth chapter on "the war along the Potomac," in which, from an already bloated literature, he teases out real insights into the civil-military tensions and inter-service rivalries that crippled Washington's decision-making establishment. His final essay on the question of a "lost victory?" makes the convincing case, at least in terms of the two options for victory he presents - an all-out aerial assault on population and a direct invasion of the North - that a realistic victory was never possible, and hence, it was "The Wrong War."

Jeffrey Record is a broad-based defense policy analyst, who brings to this book a sober and supple reasoning, as well as a considerable familiarity with the literature. Most of his reasoning is very hard to contend with, partly because he states his case so carefully and partly because he anticipates almost every conceivable objection. In his first essay, on "the reasons why," for example, he reminds the reader of the geostrategic context of the 1965 decisions to Americanize the war, highlighting the various flaws to these decisions, even as he points out the dilemma of an inevitable and immediate defeat if these flawed actions were not taken.

His examination of civil-military relations in Washington, in "the war along the Potomac," is simply the best essay I have ever read on this subject. Not only does he excoriate civilians, and especially academic theorists, for imposing their dubious "limited war" theories on frustrated military commanders, he takes the Pentagon to task for tactical missteps arising from its refusal to take guerrilla war seriously.

Some of these subjects, however, he handles less well than others. In his portrait of the war itself, both in the South and in the air war over the North, he misses the dynamic shifts to the nature of the war. In both cases, he goes as far as the Tet Offensive and Pentagon Papers, both of which end in 1968, and then stops. The war did continue on until 1975, and, as important as the Tet Offensive was, a lot happened afterwards, as well. In "the hollow client," Record spends all his time on the failings of the Diem Regime (1955-63) but devotes nary a word to the regime of Nguyen Van Thieu from 1965-75. He misses a lot of drama here in that Thieu made enormous political and military strides from 1968 to 1973, only to throw them away in two quick and tragic years.

Again, in "the war against the North," he lays out all the mistakes of the first air campaign, Rolling Thunder, from 1965 to 1968, but gives scant credit to the dramatically successful Linebacker I and II campaigns of 1972 that rolled back the Easter Invasion and forced Hanoi to return to the bargaining table in January 1973. This failure to appreciate the political significance of these latter campaigns led Record to the personal embarrassment of later insisting that the air campaign over Kosovo in 1999 was a "case study in strategic incompetence" ("Serbia and Vietnam," Air War College, May 1999, p. 1). By failing to distinguish these two campaigns, in which Rolling Thunder failed to achieve its objectives, whereas Linebacker I and II did, he failed to see that these latter two campaigns, with their introduction of "smart" bombs and precision-guided munitions set the stage for both the Gulf War and Kosovo.

Nevertheless, in this final settling of accounts on this "Wrong War," these essays of Jeffrey Record rank as a very important contribution to a sober understanding of Vietnam. I recommend it highly.

Timothy J. Lomperis

Saint Louis University