**Changing Interpretations of the Vietnam War**

Despite the broad agreement among early writers that the Vietnam War represented a colossal mistake for the United States, and that American policy was plagued persistently by errors, blunders, misperceptions, and miscalculations, significant interpretive differences still existed within that literature. In their influential book, *The Irony of Vietnam: The System Worked*(1979), **Leslie H. Gelb** and **Richard K. Betts** identified no less than nine distinct explanations advanced by experts during the 1960s and 1970s for America's failed intervention in Vietnam. They ranged from economic imperialism to idealistic imperialism, from bureaucratic politics to domestic politics, and from misperceptions and ethnocentrism to ideological blinders and the imperatives of international power politics. Analysts disagreed from the first, then, not just about the reasons for the U.S. failure in Vietnam, but about the relative weight of the factors that precipitated and sustained the American commitment.

Two sharply differentiated views emerged in that first wave of scholarship about the Vietnam War, views that continue to be echoed in today's debates. The first characterizes American involvement in the war as an avoidable tragedy. American policymakers, according to this liberal realist perspective, foolishly exaggerated Vietnam's importance to the United States. Had they more soberly assessed its true value to the economic and security interests of the United States, recognized the popular appeal of revolutionary nationalism within the country, and appreciated the limits of American power, then the ensuing tragedy might well have been averted.

That view remains the dominant interpretation of the Vietnam War. Most books and articles about American involvement, for all the different emphases that naturally distinguish the work of individual authors, fall within its wide boundaries. Major overviews of the war by such experts as **George C. Herring**, **Stanley Karnow**, **Gary R. Hess**, **George McT. Kahin**, **William S.** **Turley**, **Neal Sheehan**, and **William I*.*Duiker** take as a basic point of departure the notion that the Vietnam conflict was a tragic misadventure that could have been avoided had American leaders only been wiser, more prudent, and less wedded to the assumptions of the past. The former defense secretary **Robert S. McNamara's** memoir, *In Retrospect*(1995), also falls within this interpretive school.

The other major interpretive approach offers a far more radical critique of American intentions and behavior. It depicts the United States as a global hegemony, concerned primarily with its own economic expansion, and reflexively opposed to communism, indigenous revolution, or any other challenge to its authority. Authors writing from this perspective typically characterize American intervention in Indochina as the necessary and logical consequence of a rapacious superpower's drive for world dominance. Although scholarly and polemical treatments of the war have been written in this vein since the late 1960s, **Gabriel Kolko's** seminal *Anatomy of a War*represents the most sophisticated and comprehensive formulation of the radical perspective. Kolko sees U.S. intervention in Vietnam as a predictable consequence of the American ruling class's determination to exert control over the world capitalist system. The U.S. political economy's need for raw materials, investment outlets, and the integration between capitalist core states and the developing regions of the periphery set Washington on a collision course with revolutionary nationalist currents throughout the Third World.

By the early 1980s, a conservative revisionism had emerged that, at least temporarily, shifted the terms of a debate that up to then had largely pitted liberal realists against radical neo-Marxists. The Vietnam revisionist perspective was spearheaded by three former U.S. Army officers, **Harry G. Summers, Jr*.,*Bruce Palmer, Jr*.,*and Philip B. Davidson**, all veterans of the war. In separate books, each vehemently criticized U.S. policy. **Summers, Palmer, and Davidson** asserted that military and civilian leaders failed to develop realistic plans for achieving American politico-military objectives in Vietnam, failed to assess accurately the capabilities and intentions of their adversaries, and failed to coordinate specific battlefield tactics with an overall strategy for securing victory. The conservative critique of America's Vietnam policy scored points with academic and nonacademic audiences alike, while calling attention to fundamental shortcomings in the American approach to warfare in Southeast Asia. Another group of conservative revisionists also emerged during the 1980s. This group, which included such diverse authorities as **R. B. Smith, Larry Cable, Andrew Krepinevich, Walt W. Rostow**, and **William Colby**, insisted that real benefits accrued to the non-Communist nations of Southeast Asia as a result of U.S. intervention, and argued that the "pacification" campaign pursued by the United States could have succeeded.