

## [H-Diplo Article Review 621 on “Provoking America: Le Duan and the Origins of the Vietnam War.” \*Journal of Cold War Studies\* 17:4](#)

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Review by **Sean Fear**, Cornell University

Who really was Lê Duẩn? A central if still relatively obscure architect of the Vietnam War, the long-time General Secretary of the Vietnamese Communist Party shunned the spotlight, preferring to pull strings from behind the scenes. Overshadowed by the more celebrated President Hồ Chí Minh, whose charismatic persona was promoted partly to obscure the Party’s inner workings, Lê Duẩn was for decades the *primus inter pares* behind Hồ’s more symbolic crown. For a new generation of Vietnamese-language proficient historians, analyzing the secretive leader’s critical if underappreciated contributions is vital to augmenting American-centric Vietnam War scholarship through insights gleaned from neglected Vietnamese perspectives.<sup>11</sup>

Zachary Shore’s “Provoking America: Le Duan and the Origins of the Vietnam War” is the latest effort to shed light on North Vietnam’s enigmatic executive. Shore focuses on a single turning point in the conflict, when Lê Duẩn condoned attacks against United States forces following the August 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident, providing President Lyndon Johnson with ample pretext to instigate a dramatic escalation of the war. Within a year, the first 85,000 American troops had been dispatched to the battlefields. Shore identifies two core questions relating to North Vietnam’s provocation of its vastly stronger rival, a decision which, along with German leader Adolf Hitler’s occupation of the Rhineland or Japan’s assault on Pearl Harbor, “makes no sense at first glance” (86). First, Shore inquires, “how well did Hanoi understand its U.S. enemy?” (87). And second, if indeed Lê Duẩn and his colleagues were eager to avoid confronting the United States directly, why did they permit attacks on U.S.

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troops at Biên Hòa, Saigon's Brinks Hotel, and the Pleiku airbase, all but ensuring massive American retaliation? Were they hoping to warn the United States against intervening more forcefully? Had they badly misread their adversary's resolve? Or were the assaults perpetrated by rogue southern Communists, in defiance of northern strategic restraint?

Shore proceeds with a methodical dissection of Lê Duẩn's possible intentions and objectives. First, assessing a series of North Vietnamese Politburo directives, he rules out the notion that Lê Duẩn was unprepared for the forceful American response, citing combat readiness instructions issued after Tonkin which "suggest that Hanoi's leadership had come to see full-scale war with the United States as unavoidable" (90). Subsequent communist operations, Shore concludes, could therefore hardly have been intended to serve as a deterrent. Equally unlikely, he continues, is what he dubs the "lost control hypothesis," whereby the attacks against U.S. forces resulted from poor communications with the frontlines, or from Hanoi's inability to curb overeager southern cadres (95). After all, Lê Duẩn loyalist Nguyễn Chí Thanh commanded the southern theatre, and though Lê Duẩn may not have personally ordered the Pleiku strikes, they were consistent with his overall terms of engagement, and he was well-positioned to curb such activities had he so desired. Finally, Shore dismisses the "internal politics hypothesis," which posits that Lê Duẩn sought to provoke the United States as a means of consolidating his grasp on the Party. Well-established as General Secretary, Shore notes, Lê Duẩn already enjoyed the support of a host of influential officials in the Party over which he had presided since 1960 (96).<sup>21</sup>

How then to account for North Vietnam's counterintuitive assertiveness after the Gulf of Tonkin encounters? Shore makes the case for what he calls the "inevitable benefits hypothesis" (96). With Lê Duẩn already convinced that American escalation was inescapable, Hanoi's best course of action was to seize the initiative by striking first. This, Shore speculates, helped Lê Duẩn pursue a number of objectives. Landing the first blow in the forthcoming struggle could boost southern soldiers' morale by underscoring the Party's resolve, and by demonstrating that, although formidable, American troops were also far from invincible. A proactive approach might also enhance the stature and prestige of the Party among uncommitted citizens, bolstering its credibility as a guardian against the mounting burdens of American escalation. And even more significant were the potential effects on American public opinion should Hanoi succeed in its efforts to maximize American casualties.

Here, Shore expounds on the United States' 'escalation paradox' in Vietnam, a critical element of North Vietnamese strategic calculations. Although confronting a much-stronger military rival was an ostensibly reckless proposition, the scope of Hanoi's strategic vision, Shore argues, extended far beyond the battlefield itself. An acute observer of both international diplomatic developments and American domestic affairs, Lê Duẩn reasoned that by enticing the United States to overcommit in Vietnam, Hanoi could hasten the erosion of America's global defense posture. A 1968 Party report, for instance, somewhat self-servingly attributes American reluctance to intervene in Czechoslovakia and the Middle East to North Vietnam's ensnaring of U.S. forces in Southeast Asia (107).

Moreover, American escalation provided the Vietnamese communists with ever more opportunities to inflict casualties, weakening Washington's political resolve as what Lê Duẩn called the "American people's movement opposed to the U.S.'s dirty war" intensified (101). To that end, Lê Duẩn set specific annual "kill quotas" in order to accelerate American war-weariness (101). Shore digresses somewhat by describing a critique of a recent study on American war crimes, in effect conflating

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communist targeting of enemy combatants with alleged systematic U.S. atrocities against civilians, but he mines the North Vietnamese documentary record effectively to illuminate Lê Duẩn's strategic vision.<sup>[3]</sup> A 1965 speech reveals the Communist leader shrewdly anticipating the paradoxical waning of the United States' position even as it redoubled its presence: "the deeper they involve themselves in this war of aggression in the southern half of our country, the deeper they sink into a quagmire (103)" Much as Lê Duẩn had intended, the United States found itself lured into an asymmetrical conflict designed to be "just like punching water - when you pull your fist out, the water flows right back in" (103). A master of what Shore dubs "strategic empathy" - "the ability to discern an enemy's underlying drivers and constraints" - Lê Duẩn prevailed through a sophisticated understanding of his adversary's weaknesses, which he skillfully if ruthlessly exploited (88).

One of the lasting challenges of Vietnam War research has been limited access to official Vietnamese primary sources, particularly on matters relating to Communist North Vietnam. In this light, and given that Shore's previous publications have examined diplomatic strategy in general rather than Vietnam in particular, his efforts to provide a close reading of original Vietnamese-language documents are welcome indeed. He makes especially effective use of *Văn kiện Đảng* [Party Documents], a fifty-four volume series of documents released between 1998 and 2007 by the Vietnamese Communist Party.<sup>[4]</sup>

But if a rigorous and methodical analysis of Lê Duẩn's letters and speeches is one of the paper's many assets, its intensive focus on a narrow time-frame after the Gulf of Tonkin confrontation somewhat obscures the broader trajectory of Lê Duẩn's evolving strategic thinking. After all, by 1964, Lê Duẩn had championed aggressive intervention in the south for almost a decade. And as scholars like Pierre Asselin have demonstrated, the decision to expand Hanoi's war had already come the previous year, after bitter intra-Party quarreling concluded with Lê Duẩn and his allies cementing their control during the Party Central Committee's Ninth Plenum. Capitalizing on the momentum, Lê Duẩn called for the Plenum to endorse "an offensive strategy to smash one by one the war policies of imperialism headed by the United States." A private addendum to the Party's subsequent Ninth Resolution clarified that this should consist of targeting "main forces" in order to "attain its highest mission, which is to destroy the enemy's forces."<sup>[5]</sup> In this context, Communist retaliation after Tonkin appears to have been more the continuation of an already well-established policy than the moment when the die was cast. Shore's concise analysis undoubtedly sheds light on an important moment during the Vietnam War, though attention to the origins and ascent of Lê Duẩn's ideas would provide a more complete evaluation of how North Vietnamese strategy developed.

Finally, while Shore's method of systematically assessing each possible interpretation of Lê Duẩn's motives is comprehensive and cogent, the impression it imparts of Lê Duẩn is that of a detached, rational pragmatist rather than an impulsive, if not reckless, gambler. Though Shore convincingly outlines Lê Duẩn's perceptive awareness of American constraints, Washington was hardly Hanoi's sole adversary. And when it came to his southern counterpart, Lê Duẩn's strategic empathy proved decidedly wanting. In 1968, convinced that urban South Vietnamese would rise up to support the Communist cause, the General Secretary once again sidelined more cautious colleagues to launch the Tet Offensive. But despite political dividends in the United States, the operation was a military disaster, with some 50,000 communist casualties tipping the balance of power in the rural south. Rather than join the rebels, South Vietnam's factionalized city-dwellers instead united, albeit fleetingly, behind the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu military regime. Unmoved by the carnage, Lê Duẩn

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continued to defy the Napoleonic maxim, ‘never reinforce failure,’ with predictably disastrous results, launching costly ‘mini-Tet’ attacks well into 1969. Such efforts served only to further antagonize uncommitted southerners, thin already-depleted communist ranks, and exacerbate regional tensions within the communist movement. Four years later, with most U.S. troops now withdrawn, a second nationwide offensive was again stalled by the South Vietnamese military, assisted by American auxiliary forces. Although an astute observer of American and global affairs, Lê Duẩn benefitted from luck as much as strategic empathy. And were it not for the chronic unpopularity and corruption of successive South Vietnamese governments, which was an equally critical factor in turning American public opinion against the war, it is debatable to what extent his gambles might have paid off.

On the whole, Shore’s profitable use of Vietnamese-language sources and meticulous analysis of Lê Duẩn’s strategic calculations provides valuable insight into one of the Vietnam War’s most important but elusive personalities. And with Lê Duẩn’s American counterparts professing to have badly misunderstood their Vietnamese adversaries, Shore’s contention that, whatever his flaws, Lê Duẩn bested his enemies by appreciating and exploiting their constraints, is resonant indeed.<sup>16</sup>

**Sean Fear** is a Ph.D. Candidate in History at Cornell University. His research interests include the global Cold War, United States foreign relations, and modern Vietnamese history. His dissertation, *Republican Saigon’s Clash of Constituents: Domestic Politics and Civil Society in US-South Vietnamese Relations, 1967-1971*, examines the impact of domestic politics on U.S.-South Vietnamese relations during South Vietnam’s Second Republic (1967-1975).

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## Notes

[1] Examples include Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, *Hanoi’s War: An International History of the War for Peace in Vietnam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press): 2012; Pierre Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press): 2013.

[2] Shore implicitly sides with Pierre Asselin, who dates Lê Duẩn’s “supreme authority over Party decision-making” to 1963. Asselin, *Hanoi’s Road to the Vietnam War*, 173 Other scholars, including Lien-Hang T. Nguyen and Sophie Quinn-Judge, have argued that intra-Party rivalries continued to impact Hanoi’s strategies during the buildup to the 1968 Tet Offensive. Lien-Hang T. Nguyen, “The War Politburo: North Vietnam’s Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tet Offensive,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*, 1:1-2 (February-August 2006); Sophie Quinn-Judge, “The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-68.” *Cold War History*, 5:4 (November 2005).

[3] See Nick Turse, *Kill Anything That Moves: The Real American War in Vietnam* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Co.): 2013; Gary Krulik and Peter Zinoman, “Misrepresenting Atrocities: *Kill Anything That Moves* and the Continuing Distortions of the War in Vietnam,” *Cross-*

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*Currents* 12 (September 2014).

[4] For more on Văn Kiện Đăng see the discussion forum in *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 5:2 (Summer 2010).

[5] Asselin, *Hanoi's Road to the Vietnam War*, 164, 166.

[6] See for example Robert McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam* (New York: Times Books, 1995): 33.