Introduction by Edwin Martini, Western Michigan University

Over the past several years, scholarship that explores the gendered aspects of the American War in Vietnam has exploded, with a number of groundbreaking works that have pushed the field into new and promising directions. The recent special issue of *The Journal of East Asian Studies*, entitled “Sex and Saigon: Gendered Perspectives on the Vietnam War,” is both a contribution to this trend and an indicator of its impact. Featuring three essays, Amanda Boczar’s “Uneasy Allies: The Americanization of Sexual Policies in South Vietnam;” Amber Batura’s “The Playboy Way: Playboy Magazine, Soldiers, and the Military in Vietnam;” and Jeffrey A. Keith’s “Producing Miss Saigon: Imaginings, Realities, and the Sensual Geography of Saigon,” this issue offers readers new insights on a range of topics while suggesting some additional points for refinement and additional areas for future inquiry.  

These essays build on several waves of scholarship that came before them. The path-breaking work of scholars including Elaine Tyler May, Cynthia Enloe, Kristin Hoganson, and Robert Dean laid the foundations for

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future scholars to explore the ways in which gender and sexuality shaped and have been shaped by U.S.
foreign relations.²

More recently, a new generation of scholars, including two of the roundtable reviewers, have applied these
approaches specifically to better understand the experiences of a variety of actors during the Vietnam War.³

The three outstanding reviewers, Seth Jacobs, Heather Stur, and Kara Vuic, all found much to commend in
these essays, and in the special issue as a whole. Vuic praises the issue as “a fascinating and insightful
examination,” with “impressive works of scholarship” that “serve as useful models for further exploration” (1).
Jacobs echoes this praise, noting that the pieces “add much to our understanding of the American experience
in Vietnam” (2). Stur’s response is somewhat more tempered. She calls the essays “insightful and thought-
provoking despite occasional points where the analysis falls short,” and notes in her conclusion that the
authors might have done more to distinguish their analyses from the foundational works that preceded them
(3).

Individually, the reviewers are most in agreement on Keith’s article, which argues in part, based on the work
of Edward Said,⁴ that the gendered and sexualized legacies of French colonialism did indeed frame early U.S.
understandings of Vietnamese life, culture, and people. Drawing on a range of journalistic and literary
evidence, Keith makes a strong case, the reviewers agree, for the persistence of Orientalism as an organizing
framework for understanding the transition from French to American occupation in Southeast Asia.

The reviewers are more mixed in their opinions of Amber Batura’s article, which offers a somewhat revisionist
take on U.S. soldiers’ use of Playboy during the war, with each raising important questions about Batura’s
analysis. Batura’s central claim, that U.S. servicemen did, in fact, “read the articles,” and that Playboy served as
not only an escape from the war, but as a ‘conduit’ through which troops could engage with a range of
political and cultural topics at home, was intriguing to all the reviewers but somewhat limited in its
evidentiary basis and its implications. Jacobs describes the article as “downright revelatory,” although he does
“quibble” with Batura’s potential conflation of the magazine’s content with “a clear editorial line” (2; 5). Vuic
wonders whether Batura sufficiently interrogated the sexualized images that were an inescapable component

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of the magazine, and what the meanings of those images were for various groups (4). Stur calls Batura’s story “compelling” but “limited,” particularly given her reliance on oral histories collected by others (2).

Boczar’s essay also produced mixed reviews from the roundtable. Vuic and Stur both point to the important work Boczar has done in unearthing new evidence from Vietnamese archives, and all three reviewers noted that her work complicates our understanding both of prostitution during the war and of South Vietnamese officials’ roles in both maintaining and seeking to limit the practice. Vuic calls for more context when it comes to how military officials saw soldiers’ sexuality relative to morale, combat, and virility, and how those views may have differed from those held during previous conflicts (3-4). Jacobs, whose own work has illuminated a great deal about the power dynamics between U.S. and South Vietnamese leaders, argues that perhaps Boczar goes too far in her assertion that sexuality “became a somewhat level playing field” between the two nations, suggesting instead that U.S. officials were “as inattentive to South Vietnamese sensibilities on the sexual front” as they were “on the battlefield (3-4).”

In sum, these reviewers found much to commend in this special issue of The Journal of American-East Asian Relations. With fresh takes on fascinating topics, they believe these essays continue to move the discussion in the field forward, and that there remains much more work to be done, theoretically, methodologically, and archivally, to better understand the ways that gender, sex, and sexuality shape and have been shaped by U.S. foreign relations, in Saigon and around the globe.

Participants:

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Cambridge University Press, and *U.S. Military Integration, Civil Rights, and Combat Effectiveness Since 1945*, forthcoming from Praeger/ABC-CLIO.

Kara Dixon Vuic is the Benjamin W. Schmidt Professor of War, Conflict, and Society in Twentieth Century America at Texas Christian University. She is completing her book on the history of the U.S. military’s use of women in entertainment programs for overseas soldiers in twentieth century wars, under contract with Harvard University Press. She is the author of *Officer, Nurse, Woman: The Army Nurse Corps in the Vietnam War* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010) and co-editor of the *Routledge Handbook on Gender, War, and the U.S. Military* (in progress). She also co-edits the book series “Studies in War, Society, and the Military” for the University of Nebraska Press.
have been teaching and writing about the Vietnam War for over two decades, and I had never heard of Operation MOOSE before Tom Maddux asked me to review these articles for H-Diplo. MOOSE, standing for “Move Out of Saigon Expeditiously,” was General William Westmoreland’s response to a raft of news stories about U.S. soldiers patronizing brothels in South Vietnamese cities. Embarrassed by this coverage, and anxious to restore the image of American Army, Westmoreland took action. He declared Saigon off-limits to servicemen on leave, approved a propaganda campaign that encouraged troops to spend their money on consumer goods rather than on prostitutes, and began transferring units from urban areas to bases like Long Binh where, in theory, interactions between U.S. military personnel and South Vietnamese civilian women would be rare. The results, from a statistical perspective, were splendid. Among other things, MOOSE reduced the American presence in Saigon from 71,000 to 36,000 troops.

It did not eliminate the sex trade, however, and the scandals attending that industry—record venereal disease rates among soldiers, unwanted pregnancies, rapes, beatings, police and governmental corruption—continued to draw headlines stateside. MOOSE also failed to satisfy South Vietnamese President Nguyen Van Thieu, who had been complaining for years about American violations of his country’s morality laws and who considered MOOSE a cynical half-measure designed to give the appearance of reform while still permitting illicit activities deemed essential to U.S. troop morale to flourish. Perhaps most significantly, MOOSE played into the hands of the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong by taking soldiers away from Saigon and other city-centers on the eve of the Tet Offensive. When Hanoi launched its surprise attacks in January 1968, those targets were even more vulnerable than they had been earlier.

MOOSE is the kind of subject I love to discuss in class because it embodies so many themes of the Vietnam War so vividly; it gives us, in the historian Barbara Tuchman’s words, “the universal in the particular.”1 We have the familiar disconnect between plans drawn up in a bureaucrat’s office and actual conditions on the ground. We have the media exercising unprecedented influence on military policy. We have a weak ally trying to maintain its dignity and autonomy in the face of an overbearing superpower sponsor. We have a resourceful foe exploiting American blind spots. And could there be a better example of Westmoreland’s notorious tone-deafness than the labored title he gave this operation? (I later learned that MOOSE was lampooned within the military as GOOSE, for “Get Out of Saigon Eventually,” and that GIs relocated under it wisecracked that they had been “MOOSE-d.”)2 When I build a lecture around MOOSE, as I intend to, my students may think I am merely telling them a lurid story, but they will leave the hall having learned a great deal about America’s most divisive twentieth-century conflict.

That it took until 2016 for me to discover MOOSE attests to the timeliness of “Sex and Saigon: Gendered Perspectives on the Vietnam War.” Both Amanda Boczar and Jeffrey A. Keith address MOOSE, albeit with different scholarly agendas, Boczar presenting it as emblematic of the nearly decade-long tug-of-war between Americans and South Vietnamese over “sexual and social policy” (189) while Keith demonstrates how the operation reflected “a


Vietnam War-era Orientalism that stemmed from French antecedents.” (257). By rescuing MOOSE—and other understudied wartime initiatives—from obscurity, these two historians force us to view U.S.-South Vietnamese relations in a fresh light. No one who reads Boczar’s essay will accept the stock caricature of South Vietnam as, in her words, “a puppet state fulfilling American needs” (199) and Keith resourcefully challenges the belief, widely held in diplomatic-history circles since the publication of Melani McAlister’s Epic Encounters, that Orientalism is too totalizing and reductionist a concept to be of use in explaining U.S. foreign policy. These pieces, together with Amber Batura’s downright revelatory treatment of Playboy magazine in the late 1960s and early 1970s, add much to our understanding of the American experience in Vietnam.

Boczar follows the lead of Petra Goedde, Mary Louise Roberts, Sarah Kovner, Katharine H. S. Moon, and other scholars who have examined “intercultural intimacy and prostitution” in countries occupied by the U.S. Army. She notes that American soldiers’ encounter with South Vietnam was unique. The GIs who helped liberate France in 1944 or who served in Germany during the postwar period did not view their host communities through a racist lens. Japan was at peace when the Americans moved in. The South Korean government had no qualms about U.S. troops fraternizing with local women or paying for sex. South Vietnam, by contrast, was a conservative society with strict moral codes governing interactions between men and women. Ngo Dinh Diem, the Republic’s first president, placed a high value on female chastity and fidelity, and while his successors were less puritanical, they never reconciled themselves to the ‘boys-will-be-boys’ American view that soldier-civilian dalliances were an inescapable part of war. Add to this already fraught situation Americans’ gender- and race-inflected attitudes toward Asians, and it is hardly surprising that U.S.-South Vietnamese efforts to control the vice culture in Saigon and other heavily populated areas came a cropper.

While Boczar charts the course of these campaigns in impressive detail, I question her claims that “sexuality became a somewhat level playing field” (187) between Americans and South Vietnamese, and that “the United States did not seek to simply overrun its allies to establish social and cultural dominance” (195). To judge from the evidence

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7 Indeed, Syngman Rhee’s regime collaborated with the American military to ensure that prostitutes were easily available to servicemen. Seoul even dragooned tens of thousands of “comfort women,” or unwilling sex workers, during the Korean War—precisely the same outrage that Japan had earlier perpetrated against Korea.
Boczar herself supplies, the field was anything but level. U.S. officials in Washington and Saigon may have listened politely to South Vietnamese protests about the defilement of their society, but they only took steps to mitigate the damage when newspapers, magazines, and television stations in the United States began publicizing what Boczar calls “prostitution-related problems” (189). Senator William Fulbright’s charge that Saigon had become “both figuratively and literally an American brothel” lit more of a fire under U.S. reformers than anything that Minister of National Defense Nguyen Van Vy said or did.8 And operations like MOOSE, undertaken in the wake of Fulbright’s accusation and the attendant news coverage, were, as President Thieu recognized, at bottom public-relations efforts. Westmoreland undercut their effectiveness by allowing brothels to emerge near U.S. military installations—the most infamous being Sin City in An Khe—and looking the other way while American soldiers continued to pay for the services of South Vietnamese sex workers. Even the communicable-disease clinics established by the U.S. Army in the late 1960s to provide care and treatment for local women were selfishly motivated; they grew out of a desire to protect GIs from venereal disease, not out of concern for the overall health of the host community, and certainly not out of any larger ambition to eliminate the sex trade. The Mayor of Vung Tau saw through the charade in 1970, snapping, “U.S./Allied troops . . . mistake public health cards for ‘prostitution cards’” (217). Boczar cites a number of statements in this vein, and I accept her conclusion that “South Vietnamese officials . . . held their ground in relation to how U.S. military personnel interacted with civilians” (220). The tangible benefits of such resistance, however, appear to have been few. Uncle Sam was as inattentive to South Vietnamese sensibilities on the sexual front as he was on the battlefield.

Reading Batura’s “The Playboy Way” brought back memories of the first time I watched footage of one of Bob Hope’s United Service Organizations shows in South Vietnam. Until then, I had thought of Hope as a vaudeville relic of the World War II era, a cornball entertainer with a golf club for a prop whose schtick consisted of self-deprecating one-liners and little else and whose appeal to U.S. servicemen derived from the bevy of busty dancers, actresses, and models who shared the stage with him. I was therefore stunned by how thumpingly funny and topical he was in his 1970 Christmas Special from Long Binh, the frustration he expressed with policymakers in Washington, and the bitterness that underlay many of his jokes. His contempt for the antiwar movement was especially glaring, and whenever he gave vent to it his audience roared their approval. As I viewed this old film, it occurred to me that the troops loved Hope for a reason beyond his curvy co-stars. Oh, the eye candy was important, no doubt, but there was more to the Hope phenomenon that that. Similarly, as Batura demonstrates, Playboy provided U.S. soldiers with more than a “masturbatory aid” (222). Other publications could have served just as effectively in that regard, and yet they never became as popular with the troops as Playboy. Hugh Hefner, the magazine’s editor, hit upon a winning formula that combined erotic images, slick advertising, and trenchant social/political commentary so effectively that, according to a corporal who wrote to Hefner in the late stages of the war, “Playboy is the most anxiously awaited article of mail in the country, surpassing even that letter from home” (225).

Playboy achieved this success with America’s fighting men despite Hefner’s outspoken opposition to U.S. policy in Southeast Asia—or, perhaps, because of it. Hefner hated the war, but he respected the soldiers and empathized with their predicament. Batura notes that, along with publishing a number of articles that portrayed American troops in a positive light, Playboy gave servicemen “a sounding board for thoughts, opinions, and conversations that could get them in trouble with their superiors” (240). The ‘Dear Playboy’ letters-to-the-editor section of the magazine regularly featured contributions from soldiers addressing the military justice system, race relations within the army,

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officer treatment of enlisted men, and other explosive subjects. It is unlikely that servicemen would have felt comfortable broaching these issues in any other forum. Playboy Enterprises Inc. also awarded lifetime subscriptions to lucky grunts, sponsored ‘free-drinks’ nights for veterans at Playboy clubs across America, and sent Playboy Bunnies to veterans’ hospitals to visit the wounded. These initiatives generated good publicity for Hefner’s media empire, of course, but they also reflected his sincere concern for the young men who, he felt, deserved better from their presidents and generals. The Playboy that Batura unpacks is a far cry from the shallow girlie mag many of us think we remember. While stand-up comedians in the 1960s and 1970s were right to mock those who protested that they bought Playboy for the articles, Batura makes a persuasive case that “what surrounds the centerfold” was crucial to the magazine’s success among U.S. servicemen (221).

My one quibble with this excellent piece involves Batura’s conflation of the sentiments expressed in Playboy articles and interviews with the “opinion of the editors.” (231). It is true, as she notes, that Playboy had “no traditional editorial” and that Hefner admitted to commissioning articles from authors who shared his views, but it is still, I think, a stretch to infer from a 1967 essay by the economist and diplomat John Kenneth Galbraith that “Playboy thought” the domino theory was invalid (231-232). Even dicier is Batura’s claim that “Playboy was advocating rebellion” on the basis of contributions by columnist Nat Hentoff in the mid-1960s (238). The fact is that many of the antiwar pundits who wrote for Playboy disagreed with one another about why the United States was in Vietnam—the journalist David Halberstam, for instance, did not ascribe the same sinister motivations to policymakers that theater critic Kenneth Tynan did—and they advocated different strategies for ending the conflict. Furthermore, Playboy offered a platform to such aggressively pro-war figures as National Review editor William F. Buckley and Hollywood star John Wayne, and to individuals like American Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell, who could not have been more out of step with Hefner’s liberal philosophy. To try to tease out a clear editorial line from this cacophony of voices strikes me as misguided.

Perhaps because Keith’s work so closely tracks my own—but hopefully for other compelling reasons as well!—I could find little fault with “Producing Miss Saigon,” an elegantly wrought examination of literary theoretician Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism and how it can help explain Western, and especially American, depictions of the city that functioned as the capital of both French Cochinchina and South Vietnam.9 Keith surveys nearly a century of colonial literature in which authors figured Saigon as feminine, sensual, and seductive, and discovers that the same imagery characterized postcolonial print journalism by reporters as eminent as Halberstam and Gloria Emerson. This is one area in which the more extreme implications of Said’s critique are valid: U.S. journalists really did adopt French colonial ideas more or less across the board. Critics of Said like Andrew Rotter have a point when they argue that Saidism does not allow for the many ways in which post-World War II Americans changed the European imperial discourse to suit their own very different priorities in Asia and Africa, but in terms of literary representations of Saigon there was little to choose between Henry Daguerrches’s 1913 novel *Le Kilomètre 83* and the wartime reports of *Time* Magazine.10 The city remained a woman: innocent maiden, willing concubine, dangerous dragon lady, cold-eyed whore, but always unmistakably female and presented in contradistinction to the male West.

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Why was the gendered narrative so durable? In part, Keith suggests, because one of the twentieth century’s greatest novelists “served as a bridge between colonial imaginings and wartime reportage” (253). Graham Greene transmitted French notions of Saigon as a feminized, erotic place through his masterpiece, *The Quiet American*, and U.S. journalists absorbed his message uncritically. Many passages [of the book] some of us can quote to this day,” Halberstam declared years after the war ended. “It was our bible” (254). Keith is hardly the first historian to emphasize this novel’s impact on U.S. perceptions of Vietnam—indeed, as I note elsewhere, scholarship on *The Quiet American* “has become a cottage industry”—but no one else to my knowledge has demonstrated how thoroughly Greene hewed to the colonial line with respect to Saigon. Like the French, whose *mission civilisatrice* he championed in his dispatches during the Franco-Viet Minh War, Greene sexualized the so-called “Pearl of the Orient,” evoking both its charms and its perils in gendered terms. “[I]n Indo-China I drained a magic potion,” the author reminisced toward the end of his life, “a loving cup which I have shared since with many retired colons and officers of the Foreign Legion, whose eyes light up at the mention of Saigon. . . . The spell was first cast, I think, by the tall elegant girls in white silk trousers” (253).

One of those Saigonese girls plays a central, if passive, role in *The Quiet American*. She is Phuong, sought after by both the aging British reporter Thomas Fowler and the young CIA officer Alden Pyle. Although beautiful, Phuong is naïve—“wonderfully ignorant,” according to Fowler, who narrates the book in the first person. She has no idea who Hitler was and thinks the Statue of Liberty is in London. Fowler adores her because she caters to his every need: “She always told me what I wanted to hear, like a coolie answering questions.” When he orders her to kiss him, “she did at once what I had asked, . . . just as she would have made love if I had asked her to, straight away, peeling off her trousers without question.” Phuong is the submissive sexual plaything of French colonialist male power-fantasy, with a familiar dark side: her affections are, in effect, for sale. When Pyle offers her a cushy future in America, she deserts Fowler, her longtime meal ticket, prompting the Englishman to betray Pyle to the Viet Minh, who murder him. This love-triangle plot unfolds against a backdrop of war, intrigue, and criminal activity, most notably prostitution—the same bewitching den of iniquity represented in such early twentieth-century colonial works as Claude Farrere’s *Les Civilisés*. Keith contends that “Greene, himself under the influence of colonial imaginings, set the mold for the noisy Americans who followed him to Saigon, especially the many members of the press corps who covered the war, with his prescient yet Orientalist observations as their common journalistic and literary touchstone” (256). In other words, when the young American reporters who treated Greene’s book as holy writ arrived in Saigon in the early to mid-1960s, they saw what he had prepared them to see.

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What they did not see was the capital of a nation worthy of respect. To them, Keith notes, Saigon was “a site of debauchery” representative of the “moral turpitude inherent to Asian culture” (260, 262). Reports from the city invariably centered on its female inhabitants and their influence, either blissful or toxic, on U.S. servicemen. In the heady days after Diem’s assassination and the loosening of government sanctions against intimacy between Western men and Vietnamese women, *Time, Newsweek, the New York Times, the Washington Post,* and other major American press organs celebrated Saigon’s reemergence as, in the words of *U.S. News and World Report,* “the gayest city in Southeast Asia” (259). As the American war escalated, however, and as Saigon became the “brothel” denounced by Senator Fulbright, media depictions grew bleaker; winsome local girls metamorphosed into calculating seductresses, Viet Cong operatives, and disease-ridden hookers—poisoned fruit that tempted Americans to their doom. When Westmoreland implemented Operation MOOSE in late 1967, Keith observes, American newspapers and magazines “portrayed [it] as a way to avoid the East’s corruption of the West’s soldiers,” as though the U.S. Army presence in Saigon was not itself corrupting. (263). In 1975, with the North Vietnamese on the verge of overrunning the South and unifying their country under communist rule, the *Chicago Tribune* ran a piece simply redolent of the gendered prejudices Americans inherited from the French. “Saigon is a dying place,” reporter Ron Yates declared, “but she is dying like a whore who is desperately trying to turn her last trick” (267). No statement more clearly revealed how abjectly the United States failed to transcend the colonialist mindset of the last Western power that had sought to direct the destinies of the Vietnamese. Small wonder the American effort proved just as unavailing.

The *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* is to be commended for presenting three such worthy and provocative articles.
If there is a theme that runs consistently through the history of warfare, it is that sex is central to wartime culture. From the ancient Greek story of women who withheld sex until their men ended the Peloponnesian War in Aristophanes’ play, *Lysistrata*, to the Vietnam-War love story in Alain Boublil and Claude-Michel Schönberg’s musical, *Miss Saigon*, sex and war have been linked for as long as humans have been fighting each other. Prostitution and sexual encounters between occupying troops and local women have both informed and reflected power dynamics at play in various conflicts. Years ago, the feminist scholar Cynthia Enloe asked “where are the women?” her central research question. In the context of militarization and war, one of the answers is, on the walls of barracks as pin-ups and in the brothels near bases as prostitutes. Yet although sex has been a strategy, tactic, and operation throughout military history, only recently have historians have begun to examine the role of sexuality in shaping the war experiences of soldiers and civilians.

That *The Journal of American-East Asian Relations* devoted a special edition to sex and wartime life in Saigon indicates that scholars are continuing this line of inquiry in hopes that it can lead to a deeper understanding of the Vietnam War and its consequences. The three articles featured in this issue investigate the ways in which sex and gender influenced U.S.-South Vietnam relations, American troops’ morale and behavior during their tours of duty, and Americans’ conceptions of Saigon as an exotic, dangerous, chaotic place. Amanda Boczar analyzes U.S. and South Vietnamese policymaking regarding prostitution and builds her case, in part, on research she conducted in Vietnamese archives. This in itself is an important contribution given how few historians have worked with Vietnamese, especially South Vietnamese, sources. Amber Batura’s article offers a fresh perspective on the role of *Playboy* in soldier culture, arguing that the magazine’s questioning of the war offered servicemen a space in which they could grapple with their own antiwar feelings. Jeffrey Keith’s piece applies Edward Said’s concept of “Orientalism” to U.S. newspaper reports about Saigon to demonstrate continuity in Western perceptions and descriptions of Saigon from the French colonial era to the period of the American war. All three pieces are insightful and thought-provoking despite occasional points where the analysis falls short.

As Robert Cottrell points out in his introduction, sex has been part of U.S. wars since the American Revolution. Military officers, senators, and even presidents knew about it and responded with varying degrees of action. During


2 Ibid.


the War of 1812, Pennsylvania Congressman Jared Ingersoll accused British troops of having “rape and robbery” in their arsenal (180). In response to reports of rampant sexual assault and rape by Union troops during the U.S. Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln issued General Order No. 100, which made rape punishable by death. American and Korean officials collaborated to give U.S. servicemen access to prostitutes even though sex work was illegal in South Korea in the 1950s. Cottrell’s survey of the literature mentions the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, and the Indian Wars in addition to the U.S. Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War. It is thus a useful historiographical overview for those who are writing and teaching about sex, sexual assault, and rape in American wars.

The articles in “Sex and Saigon” extend that historiography. Boczar’s article is part of a small but growing body of scholarship that gives voice to South Vietnamese officials and citizens and presents South Vietnam as an agent rather than a pawn. Using U.S. and Vietnamese archival sources, Boczar illustrates the competing ideas American and Vietnamese officials had about prostitution and sexual morality. U.S. military officers, who were concerned about troop morale, clashed with South Vietnamese doctors and bureaucrats who wanted the sex trade to remain illegal. Although Americans strove for at least a degree of co-governance with South Vietnam on the issue of prostitution, the U.S. often acted alone, as when it authorized the building of a venereal disease clinic at a hospital in Vung Tau despite the mayor’s objections. Ultimately, Boczar argues, the two nations’ divergent attitudes about sex work and soldiers and the power dynamics at play in the U.S.-South Vietnam relationship meant that little was done to change the sexual culture of the Vietnam War in a lasting way.

Where prostitutes were not available, there were *Playboy* centerfolds; that has been the conventional wisdom about the magazine’s role in U.S. soldier culture in Vietnam. Batura challenges this notion in her study of *Playboy* as a two-way conduit of information from the home front to Vietnam and from troops to the reading public. The magazine covered race relations, the My Lai massacre, and antirwar perspectives, and it therefore helped U.S. troops to make sense of the social, cultural, and political issues that informed their war experiences, Batura argues. She tells a compelling story, but that story is limited, since, as Batura states in a footnote, she relies upon oral histories that were conducted by others, and thus could not ask follow-up questions that might have yielded evidence to strengthen her argument (223 n5). She indicates in the same footnote that she intends to do her own interviews for future research. I look forward to reading her findings, which no doubt will add to this already fascinating narrative.

Keith argues that ideas about gender and sexuality shaped Americans’ perceptions not just of Vietnamese women and girlie-magazine centerfolds but also of Saigon. Through an analysis of U.S. newspaper and magazine coverage of life in South Vietnam’s capital city, Keith illustrates how the gendered language of French colonialism lingered when American intervention replaced the French presence. While Boczar and Batura describe aspects of the social and political context of U.S. intervention in South Vietnam, Keith offers a glimpse of the war’s cultural milieu in which Saigon was feminized and sexualized. American journalists’ writings about Saigon changed according to the trajectory of the war, casting the city in earlier years as exotic and attractive, but as a “whore who is desperately trying to turn her last trick,” as the war wound down to a close. Central to Keith’s argument is that even seemingly objective journalistic coverage uses coded language to project certain messages.

Taken together, the articles in “Sex and Saigon” illustrate the multilayered nature of the Vietnam War’s sexual culture. It influenced American and South-Vietnamese policymaking, shaped how U.S. troops made sense of their experiences and tensions on the home front, and defined South Vietnam’s capital city in the American mind. The special journal issue would have been more powerful, though, if the authors had stated more explicitly what their research tells readers about the larger Vietnam War narrative. Do the authors believe that focusing on sex changes the story? All three articles build upon previous work, which the authors acknowledge, and because of that, the
authors would have made a stronger impact had they differentiated their work more clearly and convincingly. This criticism is not meant to diminish the solid research and compelling arguments of each article, however. The “Sex and Saigon” special issue will most certainly inspire additional research into the ways in which sex informed and was shaped by the Vietnam War, and it is sure to launch lively conversations about the broader historiographical implications of viewing the war through the lens of sex.
This collection of essays from the *Journal of American-East Asian Relations* offers a fascinating and insightful examination of the many ways that sexuality framed the American war in Vietnam. Growing out of recent studies of the intersections of gender, sexuality, war, and foreign policy, the articles illuminate how sexuality shaped popular conceptions of Vietnam and Vietnamese women, how prostitution complicated the United States-South Vietnamese alliance, and how sexuality formed a fundamental part of the experience of American GIs. The articles are impressive works of scholarship that investigate important questions about sexuality and war and serve as useful models for continued exploration of these themes. Jeffrey A. Keith’s article on historical imaginings of Vietnam as a sensual woman provides context for Amanda Boczar’s study of prostitution’s function as a point of contention between South Vietnamese and U.S. officials.1 Amber Batura then shifts our focus to the widespread appeal of *Playboy* magazine among American soldiers and insists that, yes, they did read the articles.2

Robert C. Cottrell’s introduction provides useful background information on the long history of sex in U.S. wars.3 As he shows, sex has played many complex and contradictory functions in war. Some commanders have lured soldiers with promises of sexual conquest in the long tradition of women being ‘spoils of war.’ Given that reality, others have employed the need to protect women from sexual assault as a tool for motivating men to fight. In his framing, wartime sexuality is most often an aggressive or abusive act in the form of rape or prostitution. And, indeed, as the many works Cottrell references on these subjects reveal, rape and prostitution have been widespread, if largely hidden, aspects of American wars.4

Scholars need to investigate and bring to light these unfortunate stories, troublesome though they are, but they also need to contextualize rape and prostitution carefully in order to avoid dismissing sex as an unavoidable part of war or essentializing sexual wrong-doing as simply what (male) soldiers do. Moreover, while it might seem apparent that sex and rape are not the same thing, scholars need to be very careful to avoid any suggestion that they might be two sides of the same coin. In Cottrell’s discussion of the U.S. Civil War, for example, he recounts the high incidence of rape and notes that “these incidents took place even though camp followers, who included prostitutes, were once again often available” (180). This conflation of sex and rape is deeply problematic. As many scholars have shown


4 Susan Zeiger’s provides a different perspective on wartime sexuality in her study of war brides, though she does not discount the imbalance of power that all wartime marriages involved. See Susan Zeiger, *Entangling Alliances: Foreign War Brides and American Soldiers in the Twentieth Century* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).
(including some referenced in the introduction), rape is a means of exerting power, not a consequence of unfulfilled sexual desire.  

It is the nature of this power that the articles here begin to explore.

The articles, through their examinations of different subjects, all suggest that wartime sexuality is important not only as an act but also as an idea that has significant and practical implications in shaping the ways nations and peoples understand and engage each other.  In 1966, not long after the United States began sending combat troops to Vietnam, Senator J. William Fulbright vividly described Saigon as “both figuratively and literally an American brothel” (193). For Keith and Boczar, Fulbright’s statement serves as a useful window into the ways that sexuality functioned as a metaphor for the war itself.

Keith finds the roots of American understandings of Vietnam in a century’s worth of colonial engagements in Southeast Asia. Colonial writers described the country through a language of sensuality that likened Vietnam to an exotic and sensual maiden eagerly awaiting the guidance of French rulers and thus legitimized colonial rule and sanitized its violence. Western journalists then picked up on these characterizations of the country and continued them in their writings about the war, casting Vietnam as a “feminized place largely defined by sensual pleasure” (244). As the American war devolved into a quagmire, Keith shows how the trope of the alluring maiden degraded into a fallen prostitute who symbolized the war’s tragic consequences for the Vietnamese people.

Keith joins an impressive list of scholars who point to the ways gender ideologies have framed foreign relations.  

It is important to understand this relationship, as Keith suggests, because ideologies helped determine what and how Americans thought about Vietnam. Journalists, he notes, “often wrote about topics they had grown to anticipate,” which slanted coverage of Vietnam and the war in particular ways (254). Boczar similarly notes that the long history of sexualized images of Vietnam and Vietnamese women shaped Americans’ expectations of what they would encounter. The servicemen sent to Vietnam, she suggests, “likely expected to meet the sensual Asian women they had seen in films or read about” (193). Both Keith’s and Boczar’s assumptions seem entirely possible, but it would be useful to know exactly how literary or journalistic coverage of the country shaped policymakers and GIs’ perceptions, behaviors, and decisions. Mary Louise Roberts shows in her study of World War II that American soldiers were familiar with conceptions of France as an exotic place, largely because of the stories told by World War

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I veterans. GIs who were headed to Vietnam did not have the stories of their fathers and grandfathers to shape their expectations about Vietnam, and it stands to reason that many soldiers, who did not even know where Vietnam was, had probably read little about the country. Still, it is apparent that whatever soldiers had or had not read, sexuality played a paramount role in the war.

As Boczar argues, sexuality shaped not only the wartime experiences of those engaged in sexual relationships or those who suffered sexual violence. It was a central problem in the United States-South Vietnamese alliance as officials from both countries struggled to agree on a response to the growing prostitution industry. Prostitution is an undeniable part of all wars, but historians wanting to understand the degree of military complicity face many problems, including a paucity of official sources. In the case of the Vietnam War, did the military officially provide prostitutes for GIs, as it had in other wars, or did it embrace a kind of ‘wink, wink’ policy that more subtly tolerated its practice? Much existing scholarship on the relationship between the military and prostitution, not on military documents that explicitly defined policy. Boczar provides an excellent model of how to do this kind of careful work. Her article relies on military documents from both American and Vietnamese archives to reveal how U.S. military officials struggling to meet GIs’ expectations negotiated prostitution policies with South Vietnamese officials who were attempting to assert their independence in the face of the industry’s central role in the local economy.

Boczar argues that during the Johnson administration, the military reluctantly and half-heartedly cooperated with South Vietnamese efforts to restrict soldiers’ interactions with American women. Officials during the Nixon administration focused more intently on the eradication of prostitution only after rising venereal disease rates, rampant corruption, and other problems made the matter unavoidable. Boczar argues that throughout the war it was a “widespread belief” that soldiers would have sex and that “this was not improper behavior” (194). This assertion bears some contextualization and clarification. Presumably, GIs’ wives and girlfriends would not have condoned sexual relations with prostitutes. Moreover, while many military officials have believed sex necessary for masculine virility, this is not an ahistorical belief. World War I-era military officials insisted, for example, that soldiers should preserve their manhood through celibacy. Why, then, were military officials so reluctant to limit soldiers’ sexual activity during the Vietnam War? As Boczar notes, they did not want to damage morale in an already morale-weary army, but was the matter more complicated? The military provided much in the way of recreation and entertainment for soldiers, and prostitution clearly became a stumbling block in the waging of the war. What can their reluctance to combat the problem reveal about the place of sexuality in the war?

With sexuality playing so great a part in the war, the widespread popularity of Playboy magazine might seem obvious. But as Batura argues, GIs turned to the magazine for more than its naked pictures. The magazine functioned “as a

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7 Roberts, What Soldiers Do.

8 Brownmiller, for example, cites journalist Peter Arnett (and very little else) as evidence that the military officially regulated prostitution. This is not to say that there is not a causal relationship between the U.S. military’s presence and the growth of brothels that catered to GIs’ sexual desires or between the destruction of war and the economic desperation that led many women into prostitution. However, historians who claim an official sanctioning of prostitution need to cite documents that clearly show an official policy.

conduit through which soldiers in Vietnam understood social, cultural, and political concerns” (223). Soldiers read the magazine for its coverage of the war, its attention to the civil rights movement, and its advertisement of an elite consumer lifestyle. In many ways, the magazine provided GIs with an escape from the war, and they appreciated its supportive coverage of their experience, even as it generally adopted an antiwar stance and criticized the draft. These topics offered GIs a window to events beyond the war and perspectives other than those provided by official military sources.

Batura’s point that GIs enjoyed *Playboy* for more than the centerfolds is well taken, but the naked pictures cannot be discounted. (The senior officers did not take the articles from their subordinates’ copies, after all.) As Keith and Boczar’s articles make clear, sexual images and sexual activity were everywhere in the war. In specific ways, sexuality combined with race to present Vietnamese women as “an exotic fantasy, but not overly so” (192). If race made Vietnamese women ‘exotic’ and alluring, it also distinguished American women whom GIs called ‘round eyes,’ regardless of their race. In this context, did the sexuality of the American women who were featured in *Playboy* mean something different to soldiers than Vietnamese women’s sexuality? It would be worth exploring, too, the military’s perspective on the magazine and its role in facilitating GIs’ access to it. Were officials concerned about its antiwar stance or coverage of home-front issues? And, once they had read the articles, what did officials think of its nude pictures? Women’s bodies have often been offered as ‘objects of obligation’ for soldiers in many wars.10 Were *Playboy*’s centerfolds the pin-up of the Vietnam War?

Each of these articles is impressive and promising. Together, they provide a new and exciting window into the Vietnam War and the relationships among sexuality, war, and foreign relations that shaped it in fundamental ways. There are a few editorial matters that deserve mentioning. The Introduction includes no notes or references, which leaves many quotations unattributed and uncited and renders it significantly less helpful than it otherwise would be. Additionally, at several places in the articles, poor copyediting has left a few sentences incomplete and without citation. These problems aside, the articles make for an excellent issue that deserves wide readership among historians of war, gender, sexuality, and foreign relations.

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