



## Staying the Course: October 1967 to September 1968

By Erik B. Villard

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Reviewed by Jon Askonas

Erik Villard’s new volume casts clarifying light on stubbornly held myths about the conduct and strategy of America’s intervention in Vietnam. Even more than the preceding volumes in the Combat Operations series, *Staying the Course* incorporates the latest historiography, including extensive North Vietnamese sources and newly released Military Assistance Command–Vietnam (MACV) documents. By carefully linking American strategic thinking to MACV 1968 campaign goals and actual operations, Villard, a historian at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, uses careful analysis to dispel a variety of myths: that MACV was over-focused on attrition, that the American mission lacked a focus on counterinsurgency or population security, that the Army was overcommitted to “conventional”

operations or “search-and-destroy,” or that American forces overlooked the need to build up the South Vietnamese military and do so in a sustainable way. The overall effect is to restore clarity and urgency to the Army’s efforts in Vietnam in that fateful year, as MACV’s leaders fought against the clock to shield and secure the population and build up the Republic of Vietnam and its armed forces against a thinking and reacting enemy with burgeoning plans of its own.

Villard’s approach fits within what might be called the New Revisionism in Vietnam War military history, standing alongside Greg Daddis’s *Westmoreland’s War* (Oxford University Press, 2014), Lien-Hang T. Nguyen’s *Hanoi’s War* (University of North Carolina Press, 2012), and Martin Clemis’s *The Control War* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2018). Contra the orthodox historians of the Vietnam War, the New Revisionists disclaim broad-brush characterizations of American or South Vietnamese incompetence, hubris, or connivance at every level. With careful evidence and access to new sources, they reconstruct American strategy-making, operations, and tactics and put them in political and international context. American leaders were generally sober, focused, informed, savvy, and sincere; in the field, American units were usually disciplined, ferocious, adaptive, and worked well with the Vietnamese. These historians view the Vietnam War as a deeply complex event, one that resists any kind of “meta-solution” or silver bullet explanation of victory or defeat. But while they have built on some of the earlier revisionists’ rehabilitation of U.S. military efforts in Vietnam, the New Revisionists have little sympathy for any simplistic notions that America “snatched defeat from the jaws of victory” or that the Nation was betrayed by fickle politicians, military incompetence, a back-stabbing media, or the antiwar movement. By focusing on the agency of the North and South Vietnamese in determining their fates, the New Revisionists highlight the limitations of American military power, even when applied with wisdom and insight.

While Villard focuses on American combat operations in a narrow timespan, these larger themes come through in a compelling way. In earlier military histories, the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong come across as a faceless, shadowy, alien, and unthinking force, like the monsoon rains. In Villard’s narrative they are a proper enemy with goals, strategy, planning, command and control, logistics, and every kind of operational constraint. And, like any enemy, they attempt to adapt to American efforts, sometimes successfully and sometimes unsuccessfully. Detailed, careful analysis allows Villard to usually present American, North Vietnamese, and South Vietnamese operations in ways that make them meaningful. Not only big events like the Tet Offensive or the Battle of Khe Sanh, but minor engagements like the battle for the Special Forces camp at Kham Duc or small-unit counterinsurgency in II Corps in Summer 1968 seem like part of an actual campaign, where a tactical outcome plays a part in both sides’ strategies. While the level of detail can be numbing, the payoff is an approximation of what Carl von Clausewitz labeled *ortsinn*—the sense of locality that enables a commander to read the battlefield and make sense of the enemy’s activities in the context of physical and human terrain. Villard helps us understand how William Westmoreland and his chief subordinates—men like Creighton Abrams, Fred Weyand, William Rosson, Julian Ewell, and John Tolson—saw the war.

And their visions, generally, come across as clear, nuanced, and contextualized. MACV’s goals are unified across the country: maintain and expand population security, in part by deterring North Vietnamese conventional forces; support development and pacification through civic action; and train up the Republic of Vietnam Military Forces. But how that mission is carried out, and what matters most, is a matter of physical and social geography. Up north in I Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ), III Marine Amphibious Force and some Army elements supported the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in defending major cities along the coast, while trying to maximally

disrupt the flow of North Vietnamese men and materiel southward along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, vitally important to MACV's strategy in the rest of the country. In sparsely populated II CTZ, First Field Force placed a heavy emphasis on security, presence, and development operations in the hamlets surrounding Dak To (60 percent of the provincial population), but saw taking the fight to the enemy in its highland strongholds as a means of avoiding additional civilian casualties. In III CTZ, Second Field Force shielded the approaches to Saigon and used air mobility to disrupt main force units, while applying maximum support to both American and South Vietnamese counterinsurgency efforts in the provinces ringing Saigon. In the populated delta of IV CTZ where the enemy was mostly Viet Cong living among the people, 9<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division commander Julian Ewell placed a heavy emphasis on operations with and the training of local South Vietnamese forces. In any case, whatever plans MACV had for steady progress in 1968 were thrown into disarray by the Tet Offensive. Although Tet created as many opportunities as constraints—and ended up being a real operational victory for MACV—it also created new demands on MACV's limited resources and pushed the American public toward withdrawal.

In a book as long as *Staying the Course*, having a clear structure makes all the difference. Villard tracks corps- and division-level activities in each of the four CTZs from October 1967 through September 1968. The book is roughly divided into three sections: before Tet, the Tet Offensive, and the aftermath. The before and after Tet sections are short scene-setting chapters overviewing important political and strategic dynamics (both in America and Vietnam), and within each section is roughly a chapter on each CTZ. The clear but dense text is accompanied by scores of photos and over 50 maps that help to breathe a little life into page after page of operational detail and after-action anecdote. Villard sticks to his ambit, perhaps to a fault. He focuses exclusively on helping the reader understand U.S. combat operations in Vietnam, with minimal digression into

strategy, politics, or other aspects of the war. The result is necessarily a truncated view of American engagement with the Vietnam War. Nevertheless, Villard has set out not to write a general history but to fill the gap of operational-level military history in Vietnam, and he fulfills his mission.

While Villard's narrative ends well before the war concludes, one can discern in the shadows of 1968 what is to come. The North Vietnamese are far more resolute, patient, and adaptable than the initial American strategy had given them credit for; even when faced with staggering losses, they maintain the strategic initiative. The Republic of Vietnam, though growing steadily, faced substantial handicaps, building up its military and counterinsurgency infrastructure essentially from nothing. Moreover, the enemy had the strategic initiative and could disrupt pacification progress whenever it wanted, using conventional offensives, terrorism, rocket attacks, and other means to seize territory, assassinate effective local officials, recruit new troops, and generate destabilizing refugees. Moreover, little could be done to avert the social and economic destabilization caused by the mere presence of nearly 700,000 foreign soldiers. And while many Americans came to believe that they could not "win" the war after Tet, even more began to question whether they could trust their leaders to tell them the truth about it, and whether it was worth the substantial cost. JFQ

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\* This book is available for free download in PDF format at <<https://history.army.mil/html/books/091/91-15-1/index.html>>. It is also available for purchase in hardcopy from the Government Publishing Office online bookstore at <<https://bookstore.gpo.gov/products/combat-operations-staying-course-september-1967-october-1968>>.

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