

do not dwell on political problems or corruption in South Vietnam. It is unclear whether politics did not fall under the purview of the book or whether the veterans interviewed were not involved in politics or they blocked it from their memories.

Of particular interest is the contrast between the Vietnam-based veterans and those who are overseas, particularly those who now live in Australia. Nguyen's book reveals the difficulties of obtaining official recognition abroad, as many South Vietnamese soldiers and civilians destroyed their identity papers, family photographs, records of service, and qualifications — 'anything that would identify them to the incoming communist regime' (p. 172). We hear of terrible plights — tales of re-education camps, escapes, and difficulties resettling in other countries. This book goes beyond the veterans themselves, bringing into its narrative the families of veterans and the impact of the war and its aftermath on them, especially on their children, providing a unique intergenerational perspective on the transmission of war memories and legacies.

The veterans were not required to answer any particular questions, but could express their memories freely. As Nguyen affirms, in the process, they reflected not only on memory and commemoration, but also 'on the shaping of stories following state repression and forced migration' (p. 12).

One limitation of the book perhaps is that it focuses on officers and does not include rank and file soldiers — but criticising the book for this would not do justice to either the author or what the book does accomplish. Given the scope and importance of the topic and the scarcity of published materials, it would be impossible to avoid some measure of selectiveness, as both Brigham and Wiest too have done in their books. Furthermore, Nguyen's book breaks ground with its broader societal focus, especially in its inclusion of the children of ARVN veterans, who for the most part do not reside in Vietnam.

*South Vietnamese soldiers: Memories of the Vietnam War and after* gives us hope that more works will appear to uncover the history of the ARVN, the RVN, and its people. It is important not only for scholars of the war, but also for the veterans and their children and grandchildren who have long been robbed of the chance to commemorate the lives and struggles of their parents and grandparents: for many, this has resulted in fragmented memories, ambivalence, and an unwillingness to discuss, if not to even think of, the war. Nguyen's book is a very important step in retrieving the histories of the RVN soldiers. We can only hope that it will inspire more people to pay more attention to this topic.

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*The British and the Vietnam War: Their way with LBJ*

By NICHOLAS TARLING

Singapore: NUS Press, 2017. Pp. 451. Maps, Notes, Bibliography, Index.  
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The most difficult point to note in writing this review of the latest monograph by Nicholas Tarling is the sad fact that it will be the last. On 13 May 2017 Professor

Tarling passed away, while swimming near his home near Auckland, New Zealand, whose academic life he graced for almost fifty years. Virtually creating serious teaching and research engagement with Southeast Asia in New Zealand academic history, Nicholas Tarling bequeathed to the rest of us an impressive body of work that dove deeply into a theme of real substance: the international history of the region and its states system, through the era connected by the Second World War, the Cold War, and decolonisation, as seen principally through the vantage points of agents of the Great Power for whom this longer era also marked fundamental change: the United Kingdom. I have noted before that Tarling's methodology is not for everyone, and this last book is no exception. Once again, author takes reader on a very deep dive through the rich archive of British Foreign Office Political Correspondence as contained in the file series FO371, augmented by other British official sources such as Cabinet Papers, the extensive American series of published documents contained in the ongoing Foreign Relations of the United States volumes, and buttressed by close engagement with published diaries and memoirs. Serial readers of Tarling's scholarship can notice some minor adjustments in method: brief introductory summaries of the theme of each chapter, recurring insightful engagement with the secondary sources, and brief but pointed analytical rather than narrative conclusions to chapters. Nevertheless, Professor Tarling never discarded his preference for what must be considered the excessive reproduction of 'what one clerk said to another' straight from the documents; a draft memorandum from the Southeast Asia Department of the Foreign Office is not only quoted from at great length, but so are the responses of several other London-based officials, as well as ambassadors in the region, before, five pages later, we see some outcome to this one discussion. Over and over. Reading this takes commitment.

The commitment is rewarded, however. The challenge to say something new about the American war in Vietnam, or to present a reassessment that deserves attention, is daunting. Tarling meets the latter challenge. The elements of the problem are familiar. The British government sought to use what influence it could muster to maintain a precarious balance: to encourage sufficient American commitment to collective security in the region to contain communist expansion and grave damage to Western interests, but also to try to steer the Americans away from policies which might escalate rather than contain conflict. This unfolded against a starting point Tarling brings out very well: the British regarded the 1954 military and political outcomes regarding Vietnam as marking a regional defeat from which the Western Powers should try to cut their losses and regroup, whereas the Americans regarded them as drawing a line of containment that must be defended. Hard slogging though it may be, Tarling's deep dive through British internal discussions regarding the formulation of policy brings this central theme out very well. It also makes very clear the most pressing dilemma the British faced from 1964, when a new and volatile American president faced an escalating challenge over Vietnam: the two principal objectives the British sought to achieve contradicted each other; that contradiction undermined their own bottom line rationale for British commitment to the region; and there was very little they could do about any of this.

The Wilson government sought to be, at one and the same time, a major power continuing to play a world role, publicly supportive of the broad aims of American policy in Vietnam, sceptical enough about American methods to appease domestic

British criticism without rupturing relations with the Johnson administration, involved in the region but not in Vietnam, and to bring about a very publicly orchestrated ‘honest broker’ diplomatic solution to resolve what they came to see as the most difficult problem: how to persuade the American government to drop a policy not likely to succeed without suffering a defeat grave enough to impair American willingness to underwrite wider collective security. The crux of this problem was that the British government was unwilling, because of political pressure as well as its own private analysis of the long-term trajectory of the region, to reinforce its lobbying of President Lyndon Baines Johnson (LBJ) by any means other than assuring him they would not be more critical of American policy than they politically had to be, in public. This was never going to be enough. Tarling makes another contribution by wading into an active scholarly debate with a compelling analysis: the most consequential aspect of individual personality in this British problem was not Wilson’s failure to get along with LBJ, but rather his confident yet completely wrong assumption that he ‘knew’ the Russians, that he could persuade them into playing a more active role to influence ‘their’ ally on the ground — North Vietnam — and that together the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, as the co-chairs of the 1954 Geneva Conference and agreements, could steer the belligerents towards a stand down and resolution. By the time Tarling has finished demolishing this pretension, it is clear that Wilson’s own cockiness was driven by more than a touch of desperation — there really was not much else Britain could do. The bottom line was clear by 1968: the British sought to ‘help’ the Americans in Vietnam because their most important global requirement in strategic foreign policy was to maintain the closest possible relationship with, and support from, the United States, but the things they felt able to do about Vietnam were never going to be enough. The arrow pointing towards East of Suez disengagement, and a fundamental change in the British world role, was now very clear.

Reading this work as the culmination of Tarling’s earlier studies of British responses to the coming of war in Southeast Asia in 1941, to the impact of the Korean War on the region and their own prospects and interests, and of British engagement with the Cold War problems involving first Laos, then Cambodia — all published by NUS Press — can do something very interesting. It can reveal the sustained engagement of a scholar of real insight, sober and balanced in assessment of situations, choices and perceptions, with the decades-long effort by an institution, the British government, led by its Foreign Office, to come to grips with a dynamic downward spiral. This saw the United Kingdom evolve from being the principal Great Power in the region to one that could no longer influence its fundamental direction. The parallel continuity of Foreign Office policymaking and Tarling scholarship is more than striking, and spanning as it does this longer timespan of definitive regional change it is a real contribution. If anyone may be said to have thought their way into the ‘official mind’ of a Great Power whose strategic foreign policy choices really mattered to wartime and postwar Southeast Asia it is Nicholas Tarling. We shall miss him and his scholarly voice.

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