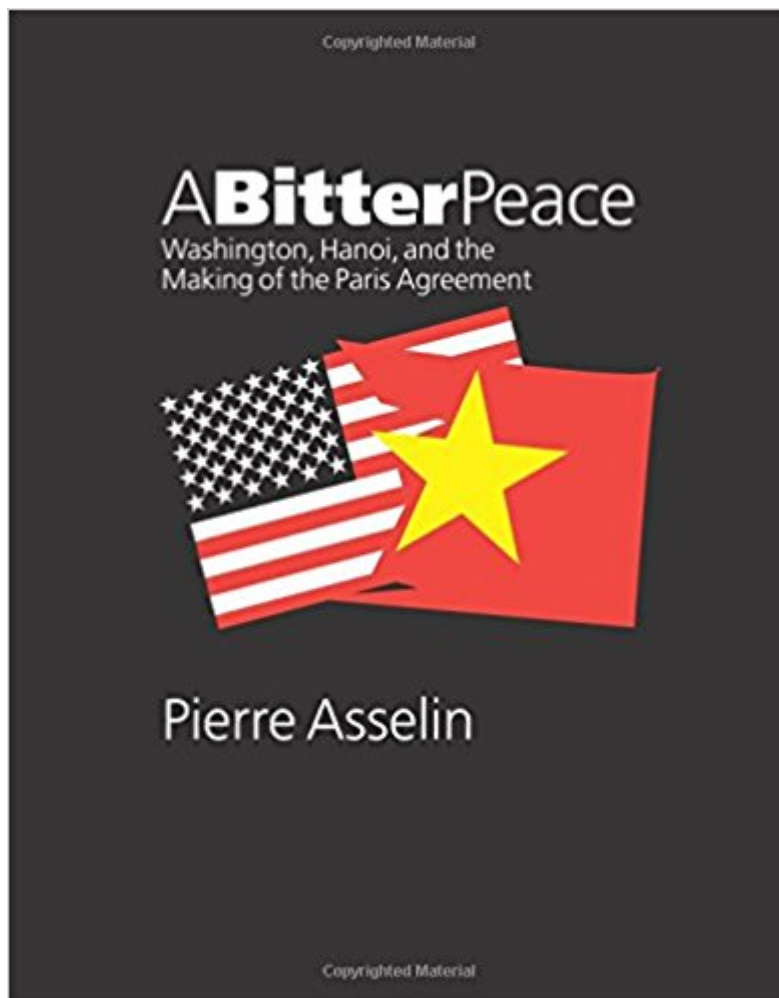




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# A Bitter Peace: Washington, Hanoi, And The Making Of The Paris Agreement



## Synopsis

Demonstrating the centrality of diplomacy in the Vietnam War, Pierre Asselin traces the secret negotiations that led up to the Paris Agreement of 1973, which ended America's involvement but failed to bring peace in Vietnam. Because the two sides signed the agreement under duress, he argues, the peace it promised was doomed to unravel. By January of 1973, the continuing military stalemate and mounting difficulties on the domestic front forced both Washington and Hanoi to conclude that signing a vague and largely unworkable peace agreement was the most expedient way to achieve their most pressing objectives. For Washington, those objectives included the release of American prisoners, military withdrawal without formal capitulation, and preservation of American credibility in the Cold War. Hanoi, on the other hand, sought to secure the removal of American forces, protect the socialist revolution in the North, and improve the prospects for reunification with the South. Using newly available archival sources from Vietnam, the United States, and Canada, Asselin reconstructs the secret negotiations, highlighting the creative roles of Hanoi, the National Liberation Front, and Saigon in constructing the final settlement.

## Book Information

Series: The New Cold War History

Paperback: 304 pages

Publisher: The University of North Carolina Press; 1 edition (November 25, 2002)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807854174

ISBN-13: 978-0807854174

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.7 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 15 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 3 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #251,943 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #23 in [Books > Politics & Social Sciences > Politics & Government > International & World Politics > Treaties](#) #272 in [Books > History > Asia > Southeast Asia](#) #405 in [Books > Textbooks > Humanities > History > Asia](#)

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Asselin makes an important contribution in helping us understand what happened in the secret 'Nobel Prize-winning' negotiations between Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger. Two years later South Vietnam no longer existed. Asselin makes a powerful case that the outcome of the war was determined not on the battlefield, but at the negotiating table. (Larry Berman, author of "No Peace,

No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam") Pierre Asselin has made good use of both American and Vietnamese sources. This is the best study I have seen of the process that produced the Paris Peace Agreement. (Edwin E. Moise, author of "Tonkin Gulf and the Escalation of the Vietnam War")

Asselin is a part of a new generation of Vietnam scholars who are defying the academic taboo against addressing the torturous war period from perspectives both north and south of the seventeenth parallel. . . . Asselin's work will undoubtedly advance the discussion on the Vietnamese-American War enormously. *A Bitter Peace* is an excellent contribution to the literature that will hopefully encourage present and future scholars of Vietnam to finally address issues of that most taboo war.--*Journal of Asian Studies* A well-researched, beginning work of scholarship that should be read by all interested in the Vietnam War.--*Journal of American History* *A Bitter Peace* is a welcome addition to the burgeoning literature on the last stages of the Vietnam War.--*International History Review* This is an impressive work of diplomatic history and an important contribution to the growing body of 'new Cold War history.'--*Virginia Quarterly Review* Making use of extraordinary new documents from archives in the United States and Vietnam, Pierre Asselin makes an important contribution in helping us understand what happened in the secret 'Nobel Prize-winning' negotiations between Le Duc Tho and Henry Kissinger. Two years later South Vietnam no longer existed. Asselin makes a powerful case that the outcome of the war was determined not on the battlefield, but at the negotiating table.--Larry Berman, author of *No Peace, No Honor: Nixon, Kissinger, and Betrayal in Vietnam* As good an account of the 1972 negotiations and the resulting agreement as we are likely to get.--*American Historical Review* Pierre Asselin has made good use of both American and Vietnamese sources. This is the best study I have seen of the process that produced the Paris Peace Agreement.--Edwin E. Moise, Clemson University

This book is the more recent devoted on such a subject. Not only did the author researched in the US archives but also in the Vietnam archives in Hanoi. He has a balanced and strong view of a question which is still discussed. He proves that peace could not come before it came, as the North Vietnamese did not want to negotiate when they were hopeful to win. But Nixon was in the same mood, his Peace in Honor could only be reached by a victory: making Hanoi capitulate and keeping strong enough South Vietnam: he failed. But with common obstinacy both camps made the war lasting four years more with thousands of death and much destruction.

"A Bitter Peace" is a meticulous reconstruction of the negotiations between the U.S. and North Vietnam that resulted in the 1973 Paris Peace Agreement. The book is clearly-written, balanced, and based on research in American and Vietnamese archives. It is realistic about power politics and avoids the moralizing that mars much of the literature on the Vietnam War (orthodox and revisionist alike). I give "A Bitter Peace" only four stars mainly to warn prospective buyers that the book was written for scholars, not ordinary readers. It provides little or no background on the war, and central characters such as Henry Kissinger and Le Duc Tho step onto its pages without introductions. Readers new to the subject would be lost.

Pierre Asselin's extensive researches in the North Vietnamese archives bear fruit in his *A Bitter Peace*. Unlike more US-centric accounts of the tragedy that is the Vietnam War, Nixon's goal of an "honorable" end to the war strikes Asselin as proper and justified in the context. Indeed, Asselin gives Nixon and Kissinger considerable credit for how well they conducted both the last four years of the war and the negotiations, again, given the context. To be sure, their conduct of the war was as ruthless an example of power politics as has ever been seen. Likewise, the Paris Agreement of 1973 was a hyper-cynical betrayal of the South Vietnamese government and people. Still, taken in the context provided by the North Vietnamese archives, Nixon and Kissinger did better than one might have expected, better than their predecessors. They withdrew American forces under fire in a manner that created the appearance of giving the South Vietnamese government for a "fighting chance." A withdrawal that a cynic could breezily call "honorable." The context that produces Asselin's unexpected favorable evaluation of Nixon and Kissinger was the countervailing ruthless power politics and hyper-cynicism of Le Duan and the Politburo. As Nixon and Kissinger struggled ruthlessly and cynically to negotiate an "honorable" end to American involvement, the Le Duan and the Politburo struggled cynically and without pity to accomplish reunification with the South through military conquest. That the American War, like the French War, actually ended with a diplomatic agreement was, in a sense, a disappointment for the Le Duan and the Politburo, a strategic compromise reluctantly forced upon it by an unfavorable "balance of forces." The unfavorable "balance of forces" were 1) the two crippling costly Spring Offensives of 1968 and 1972 and 2) the two devastating American bombing campaigns of the North, Johnson's ROLLING THUNDER and Nixon's LINEBACKER. As Asselin makes clear, from the perspective of Hanoi, the purpose of opening negotiations with the Johnson Administration on 13 May 1968 in Paris was not to end the war. Rather, its purpose was to gain respite in the North from the devastation of ROLLING THUNDER and to gain time in the South to recover from the unexpectedly high casualties of the

February 1968 Tet Mau Than (Tet Offensive) (p4-5). Respite having been achieved, negotiations dragged on for four years until the North had recovered enough to launch the 1972 Spring Offensive. Once again, the crippling casualties of the offensive and the devastation of Nixon's LINEBACKER bombing campaign of the North forced the Politburo to negotiate, albeit more earnestly this time. Surprisingly, Asselin makes it clear that Nixon's escalation of the bombing of the North in December 1972 was the single most significant factor in forcing the two sides to come to a final agreement (p164-5). That the tragedy that is the Vietnam War resulted from the cynical and instrumental manipulation of military power by both sides is not much of surprise. But thanks to Asselin's archival work, we now have much more balanced view. Now, we know that Nixon and Kissinger's cynical use of power was overmatched and exceeded only by that of Le Duan and the Politburo. That said, what struck me most forcefully in *A Bitter Peace* was how, deep in the background, both sides were trapped in and driven by a late nineteenth and twentieth century ideological struggle. A struggle that pitted "revolutionary socialism" against "Capitalism and Freedom." On the one hand and contradictorily, Le Duan and the Politburo saw themselves primarily as the vanguard of the "international proletarianism" in a bourgeois nationalist revolution and of the "revolutionary working class" in a peasant society. On the other hand and with equal contradiction, Nixon and Kissinger saw themselves as defending the ramparts of "Capitalism and Freedom" in a war that had been lost before it began. As a result, the suffering of the people on the ground in Vietnam, North and South, was elided as both sides pursued their conflicting ideological fantasies with the ardent fervor of diehard dogmatists. Had the Vietnamese Workers Party been merely a nationalist movement dedicated to overthrowing French colonial rule in the beginning, much of the subsequent tragedy could have been averted. But, no, the Vietnamese Workers Party dogmatically pursued an internationalist revolutionary ideology with the same determination as the American presidents from Truman to Nixon dogmatically pursued a cartoon "Capitalism and Freedom" ideology. The final tragic irony, of course, is that both dogmas eventually passed into oblivion, as is usually the case for dogmatic ideologies. The internationalist socialist revolutionary ideology died in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union the next year, what Francis Fukuyama called "The End of History." The ideology of "Capitalism and Freedom" passed away unnoticed after 1989 and was replaced with the "War on Terrorism" in 2001.

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