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Reviews

New Zealand and the Vietnam War: Politics and Diplomacy. By Roberto Rabel. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2005. 443 pp. NZ price: $44.99. ISBN 1-86940-340-1.

IN 2001, IN A PHRASE HE MAY HAVE EXPECTED to come back and haunt him, Roberto Rabel declared official war history an exhausted mode of scholarship on the basis of its entrenched empiricism and the fact that official historians were running out of wars to cover.[1] Now he has gone ahead and published an official war history. He has an 'out' clause though — so far his war has not been much written about. This long-awaited volume on diplomacy is to be joined by another by Ian McGibbon about the New Zealand military, medical and aid units that went to South Vietnam and the problems experienced by veterans in the aftermath of the war. Together they will fill a major gap in our history.

As Rabel points out in his introduction, the Vietnam War was New Zealand's 'most prolonged, most reluctantly entered into and most politically divisive military experience of the twentieth century' (p.vii). The 'reluctantly entered into' part of the war's history makes the story important and fascinating but presents challenges in the writing. The first hundred pages of the text are at best a slow read, with Rabel taking readers through the complex background to Prime Minister Keith Holyoake's announcement at the opening of Parliament in May 1965 that New Zealand would be sending a combat unit to help defend the Republic of Vietnam from communism. Without this material the book would fall short of one of its major aims. To set New Zealand's Vietnam-era diplomacy into its geopolitical and ideological context Rabel details the convergence between a number of major trends in New Zealand's post-war external relations: the growing reliance on the US and a shift away from Great Britain, increasing co-operation with Australia and a greater awareness of the Asia–Pacific region, the fear of the spread of communism in South-east Asia and the rise of a 'Cold War' vision of the postwar world. To substantiate this point and flesh out the background, the first four chapters focus on New Zealand and the First Indochina War, New Zealand foreign policy in the decade prior to the Gulf of Tonkin resolution in 1964, domestic debate about the conflict in the years between 1945 and 1964, and the diplomacy in the crucial six months between Lyndon Johnson's November 1964 electoral victory and Holyoake's announcement. Each is well crafted, detailed and well researched, but they tend to read like a very long preamble to the later chapters, a duty read rather than a must read. But, despite his openly expressed reservations about history's empirical mindset, he does empiricism well.

In the mid section of the book Rabel hits his stride. His article on the New Zealand anti-war movement in *Peace & Change* has long been the best on the topic. Here Rabel extends his account of the protest movement, developing it in tandem with his story of the official manoeuvrings in and out of war. The National government, the Labour opposition and the anti-war movement are all well drawn. Interspersing the narrative are important insights such as the extent to which all participants in the debate over New Zealand national interests argued in Americanisms. Most of the drama is in the stories of the mid to late 1960s. As Rabel points out, by the end of 1968 the debate, like the war itself, was bogged down. President Nixon's efforts to pave the way for American withdrawal by escalating the US military involvement created what Rabel delicately terms 'heightened sensitivity' in Wellington. New Zealand, described by a senior Foreign Affairs official as the 'most dovish of the hawks', began pulling troops out in 1971. Like Australia, New Zealand shifted to using army personnel in training rather than combat roles, consistent with Nixon's policy of 'Vietnamization'. Disengagement required 'tact and finesse' from officials and politicians, with the ever-present possibility of getting off-side with Washington and Canberra.

Holyoake, who led the programme of disengagement, announced his retirement at the beginning of 1972, leaving his successor, John Marshall, to fight, and lose, the 1972 election. Despite incidents such as the protests during General Westmoreland's February visit, scuffles on Anzac Day and the increasing radicalism of the New Zealand anti-war movement, Rabel concludes that the war did not figure much as an election issue. The large-scale demonstrations of July 1972 were an end, not a beginning. Peace talks in the later half of 1972 took some of the sting out of the anti-war protest, as did (surprise! surprise!) persistent divisions within the protest movement itself. Ironically the Labour victory in 1972 would effectively render the war a domestic political non-starter. While the Labour government of 1972–5 inherited more than a decade of opposition to the war, in power it practised moderation. In opposition National stayed quiet on the issue. Despite Kirk's withdrawal of the New Zealand training teams, announced within days of the election win, and a kafuffle over his criticisms of Nixon's Christmas 1972 bombing offensive, Rabel sees the third Labour government as managing to avoid lasting repercussions for its self-consciously more 'independent' and 'moral' foreign policy.

Rabel has delivered more than the 'reasonably comprehensive and authoritative narrative history' (p.vii) promised in the introduction. The book offers a fine case study of Cold War New Zealand and an extended account of the anti-war protests. Who can resist a photograph of a placard proclaiming 'Every Communist is a Fink!', or a poster advertising an anti-war 'teach in' in Auckland's Albert Park with an image of a Che Guevara-esque beret-wearing, guitar-strumming activist? People wanting to include parts of his work in their teaching might wish for a shorter book or one where the analysis was more easily separable from the narrative. It is to be hoped that key parts of the argument appear in article or essay form in order that students and general readers, daunted by 350 plus pages of closely plotted narrative, do not miss the point. The final chapter in particular on the historical significance of New Zealand's Vietnam experiences is a model of well-directed and succinct academic writing. This is a fascinating and under-researched period in New Zealand history. As Rabel elucidates, while the specifics of the Vietnam experience have become steadily less important, the dilemmas it presented about the reconciliation of competing interests and priorities in New Zealand foreign policy remain with us. The history of the Vietnam War, evoked so routinely in current debates about the pros and cons of external interference in the internal conflicts of other nations, will not be replayed. Rabel's work illustrates how it was grounded in the particularities of geography, personality and ideology. Nonetheless, as he ably shows, even though the world has been transformed since the 1990s by the end of the Cold War and the geopolitics of international terrorism, it is useful to be reminded that there are few black and white situations in international diplomacy. One of the enduring legacies of New Zealand's Vietnam-era politics is that debate about how a small state with limited resources might best contribute to regional and global security has become an inescapable part of the New Zealand political landscape.

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NOTE

1 'War History as Public History: Past and Future', Bronwyn Dalley and Jock Phillips, eds, *Going Public: The Changing Face of New Zealand History,* Auckland, 2001, p.66.