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Review: *Death Zones & Darling Spies: Seven Years of Vietnam War Reporting* by Beverly Deepe Kever

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Death Zones & Darling Spies: Seven Years of Vietnam War Reporting

By Beverly Deepe Kever. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2013, 360 pp.

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It is no easy task to write a book on the Vietnam War which reads fresh and innovative and even contains several surprising findings, but Beverly Deepe Kever's study on the Vietnam War does just that. The key to her success is that her book is equal parts personal memoir and insightful historical analysis. During the seven years (1962-1969) that she covered the war for various American newspapers and weeklies, Deepe Kever gained deep insights about the country as well as the sentiments of the Vietnamese population, especially the rural South Vietnamese farmers who were so vital to the outcome of the war. Integrated into the historical scholarship of the conflict, her wartime reporting as well as her hindsight analysis merge into an intriguing blend of storytelling and critical review.

It was a great advantage for the Deepe Kever as well as the reader of her book that she arrived in Vietnam War well before the war had officially begun. In fact, the first half of her study deals with the period from 1962-1964 and chronicles the far-reaching involvement of the United States in the confrontation. After being hired as *Newsweek's* accredited reporter in late 1962, the author joined a small cadre of experienced Vietnam journalists and was able to get privileged access to American-supported operations as well as some of the main architects of the war effort. Like others, she early on sensed and reported on the widespread dislike for the South Vietnamese government and its president Ngo Dinh Diem. From the failure of the Strategic Hamlet Program to the Buddhist crisis and the ill-advised overthrow of the Diem government in 1963, Deepe Kever provides an engaging on-the-ground perspective of the campaigns, tensions and fateful developments of these early war years.

Because of her early and frequent sorties to the battlefields, the author is able to succinctly capture many of the fatal errors of the US and South Vietnamese strategy: the ultimately flawed reliance on helicopter warfare, the lackluster rural pacification efforts, the devastating war in Laos as well as the tragic and unsustainable defense of far-flung perimeter fortresses like the Khe Sanh Combat Base later on in the war, where Deepe Kever spent a harrowing week reporting for the *Christian Science Monitor* in March 1968. Even at the time,

the author accurately described Khe Sanh as the dead of the US war and “the self-destruction of Westmoreland’s search-and-destroy strategy” (215).

Another strength of the book is that it reflects on the advantages and disadvantages of a female reporter in the Vietnam theater. As one of the very few female reporters in the early phase of the war, Deepe Kever often found herself sidelined and partly marginalized by authorities as well as her male colleagues. Yet her gender also provided her some exclusive access to South Vietnamese women all walks of life, which she utilized to compose colorful and rich everyday vignettes of Vietnamese life. It also allowed her a closer relationship especially to rural women and their families, which translated into a greater awareness and knowledge of the hardships of the female population as well as the plight of the refugees caught up in the crosshairs of the war. At the same time, her courageous sorties and front-line reporting in many theaters of the war ultimately earned her the respect of the US military brass as well as her fellow reporters.

Deepe Kever also does not shy away from discussing potentially embarrassing parts of her wartime reporting, especially the fact that her closest Vietnamese associate from 1964-1969 turned out to be a valuable North Vietnamese spy, which explains the second half of the book’s title. To be sure, the author was not the only victim nor the only one misled by the Vietminh master spy Pham Xuan An, who was a trusted source and insider for numerous Western journalists stationed in Saigon. Of course, her final chapter speaks of the personal betrayal which she felt when learning the full extent of Xuan An’s activities. Yet here as well her analysis is judicious and balanced, mixing her own insights with those of historical writers as well as the perspective of her formerly trusted associate.

All in all, Deepe Kever’s book is an important and noteworthy addition to the literature on the Vietnam War and the media coverage of the conflict. Her first-hand experiences and reports, mixed with released government documents and historians’ accounts, create a unique blend of historical analysis, which will be beneficial to those familiar with the history of the Vietnam War and to general audiences, as well as suitable for undergraduate surveys and courses.