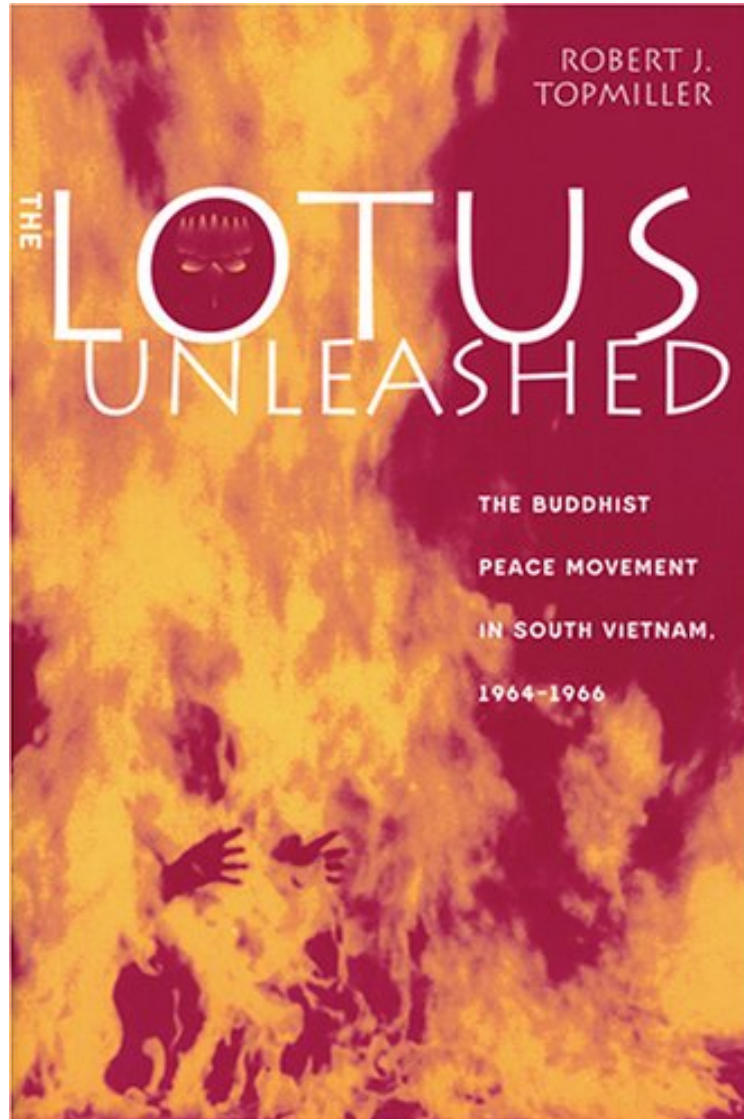


(Free download) The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966

## The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966

*Robert J. Topmiller*

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#3596409 in Books The University Press of Kentucky 2006-11-01 Original language: English PDF # 1 9.02 x .52 x 5.981, .78 #File Name: 0813191661232 pages | File size: 42.Mb

**Robert J. Topmiller : The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966**

before purchasing it in order to gauge whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966:

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Sheds new light on a crucial point in our history By Michael Archer Few Americans, who lived in the 1960's, will ever forget the grotesque spectacle appearing on the evening

television news as Vietnamese Buddhist monks (and nuns) regularly burned themselves to death in protest of government policies they believed were bringing about the destruction of their country. In *The Lotus Unleashed*, an absorbing account of those times, Dr. Robert J. Topmiller examines the complex political climate in then-South Vietnam during the years immediately leading up to the massive increase in U.S. ground troops there. The author provides a plethora of new information about this popular Buddhist led-movement which was intent on establishing a freely-elected government in South Vietnam; one free of American occupying forces. In addition to his meticulous research, Topmiller interviewed surviving leaders of the Buddhist Peace Movement; an often difficult and risky task, since many were at the time still under suspicion, or house arrest, by the current government. *The Lotus Unleashed* makes sense of the chaos occurring within South Vietnam in the mid-1960's, as seen not only in the bitter dissension between, and within, South Vietnam's political, religious and military organizations, but also between the U.S. Army and Marine Corps forces stationed there. Lessons, seemingly relevant to our current foreign policy, leap from the pages. Perhaps the most important of these derives from a consistent misinterpretation and mistrust by U.S. policymakers with regard to the motives of the Buddhist protesters, and other non-communist nationalist factions, who opposed the government in Saigon. This lesson, in its simplest form, might read: Because a faction does not support us, it does not necessarily mean it supports our enemy. Topmiller sheds much new light on this crucial point in our history and presents a compelling argument that the Buddhist Peace Movement, far from being an inconsequential player in the larger struggle between the United States and Soviet Union for hegemony in the region, may well have been the last practical opportunity to avoid the ensuing tragedy that eventually cost the lives of over 58,000 Americans and nearly 3 million Vietnamese. As I finished this extraordinary book, the words of the American poet and abolitionist John Greenleaf Whittier came to mind: "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, The saddest are these: It might have been!"

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Concept Outstanding; Execution, Not so Much  
By Terry J. Carter  
OK, #1, I was there (so?). #2, I came home and got into an Asian Studies program. By now I have read a couple of hundred books on the war. Just sayin'. That don't make me no expert, but I have a few well-grounded ideas. :) This is a brilliantly conceived and very badly executed book. First, the good news. Maybe I read too many "establishment" writers on the subject, but how did I go so long and not find a reference to this book? Man! It's like the Missing Link. I went to add what I learned to my existing notes--that was easy because on what Topmiller reveals, I had zero information before. This book totally refutes the diligent but misguided Marguerite Higgins and her pro-Diem raving about how the Buddhists were all Commies, and it gives frank and helpful insight into what was going on "behind the front lines," between the Saigon government under Khanh and Ky and the "Struggle Forces." Eye-opening, vital, and all those rave words. Now the bad news. If the Kentucky Historical Society thinks this book is "eminently readable," they've been nipping too much white lightning. Mr. Topmiller has two main themes: the culture and ideology of Buddhism, and then the "narrative history" of what happened between Diem and the election of Thieu and Ky--that sort of 'Smutnoye Vremya' of RVN history that many writers sum up as "Khanh was terrible." That makes his wonderful content all the more helpful, but had I written this book, I would have laid out the Buddhists' hopes and dreams in chapter one, so that Macauley's Every Schoolboy was clear on what they were about, and then I would have gone into the narrative of events. Mr. Topmiller chose to weave them together, in a frustratingly Melvillian manner. (Starbuck is about to harpoon a whale in *Moby Dick* when Melville interjects a section which should have been called, "Everything you wanted to know about whales but were afraid to ask.") Topmiller has Air Vice-Marshal Ky poised to attack Da Nang, and then chooses to regress into more Buddhist material, which hopefully the reader already gets, or got the first time around, back in chapter one. I find that frustrating. Even as narrative, the narrative part gets a little fuzzy; I read the intro twice and I'm still not sure when Khanh did what. Last negative--and this will brand me as a total dinosaur, but so be it--Mr. Topmiller, with all due respect, would not know a dependent clause if it came up to him on the street and introduced itself. OK, many contemporary writers are like that, but sometimes I don't even follow his logic through sequential simple declarative sentences. Oh well, blame the editor and move on. But the nagging question, IMO, is, "How can you communicate an interpretation of events if you have such a marginal understanding of how your own language is supposed to work?" The review by Transformations is a cliché and a joke in my opinion; they did not see Mr. Topmiller's depth. (I saw his depth, and credit it; I just think his depth was a bit murky.) This did not strike me as a pin-the-tail-on-X-for-losing-Viet-Nam book; it's good cultural history. The guys who nailed it were my brothers in the V.V.A.--now we're back to the good new--because Mr. Topmiller presented the Vietnamese people as three-dimensional human beings with hopes and dreams of their own. Another thing he's good for is the "hearts and mind" versus "firepower, firepower, firepower" debate. IMO, the whole war--the whole series of wars, 1945 to 1975--was about nationalism first and foremost. Bottom line: Well worth reading, despite its faults. 16 of 17 people found the following review helpful. This is an important book on the American-Vietnam War  
By A Customer  
This new book on the American-Vietnam War, writes Robert J. Topmiller, "contains few American heroes but focuses instead on the enormous sacrifices of Vietnamese Buddhists to halt the conflict." In the end, the conflict caused 58,000 American and 3 million South and North Vietnamese deaths. "The Lotus Unleashed: The Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam, 1964-1966" marks the culmination of one historian's decade-long endeavor to tell the story of America's longest war from the perspective of those South

Vietnamese Buddhists "who risked everything for peace." The author, an alumnus of Central Washington University, is a Vietnam War veteran and a history professor at Eastern Kentucky University. Topmiller asserts that America's defeat in Vietnam ultimately resulted from the illegitimacy and unpopularity of successive South Vietnamese governments, which aside from being dictatorial were dependent on and subservient to a warring foreign power, the United States. Above all, he writes, most South Vietnamese wanted peace and independence. Examination of the Buddhist Peace Movement, Topmiller argues, typifies both "the ambiguity felt by Vietnamese over the American [Cold War] crusade" and "America's frustration over its inability to influence events in South Vietnam." The Buddhists, who hoped to establish peace and democracy and to eradicate poverty and injustice, represented the most significant non-communist group that challenged the South Vietnamese government. The Buddhist Movement's first defining moment came in June 1963 when an elderly monk protested his government's religious persecution by setting himself on fire. Photographs of the self-immolation and the government's repression of Buddhist protesters galvanized American and world opinion against South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who was assassinated in a November coup. As Topmiller emphasizes, the toppling of Diem did not work in favor of the Buddhists' drive for peace and nationalism. Instead, it created a political power vacuum filled by South Vietnamese generals, who permitted increased American intervention and an expansion of the war against communist North Vietnam. Washington secretly opposed the Buddhist objective of a populist government because it risked instability and possible cooperation with local communists, and at best, such a course would lead to a "neutralist" approach to the Cold War. The United States found it increasingly difficult to maintain stability in South Vietnam, a country plagued by interest group factionalism and regional divisions. Topmiller illustrates this vividly by reconstructing the 1966 Buddhist Crisis in Danang, where U.S. Marines attempted to prevent fighting between their military ally, the South Vietnamese Marines and Air Force, and Buddhist and student protesters, who were aided by dissident South Vietnamese army units. At one point, South Vietnamese fighter planes "accidentally" strafed and injured eight U.S. marines in Danang. A livid U.S. Marine general ordered American fighters to fly over the Vietnamese planes to forestall further strafing. Upset with this adverse action, the South Vietnamese launched additional planes to fly over the American jets. This retaliation only caused more U.S. planes to take to the air. Finally, "after more stern warnings" from the Americans, the Vietnamese Air Force "backed down." Nevertheless, by the end of 1966, the U.S.-backed government in South Vietnam forcefully subjugated the Buddhist Peace Movement. Topmiller suggests that the Buddhist Crisis may have represented a missed opportunity for peace and a chance for the United States to avoid a humiliating and tragic defeat. His well-written narrative and nuanced understanding of South Vietnamese and American motives and actions are the result of painstaking research in the United States and Vietnam, including interviews and correspondence with key actors. With the United States at war in the Middle East, Topmiller's book serves to remind us of the challenges and pitfalls of American involvement in far-flung conflicts.

During the Vietnam War, Vietnamese Buddhist peace activists made extraordinary sacrifices including self-immolation to try to end the fighting. They hoped to establish a neutralist government that would broker peace with the Communists and expel the Americans. Robert J. Topmiller explores South Vietnamese attitudes toward the war, the insurgency, and U.S. intervention, and lays bare the dissension within the U.S. military. *The Lotus Unleashed* is one of the few studies to illuminate the impact of internal Vietnamese politics on U.S. decision-making and to examine the power of a nonviolent movement to confront a violent superpower.

"Tells the story of how the Buddhist-inspired Struggle Movement sought to challenge the legitimacy of the Government of South Vietnam in the middle years of the 1960s." *Contemporary Buddhism* "A meticulously detailed and eminently readable account of the Buddhist Peace Movement in South Vietnam." *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* "A major contribution to the study of the Vietnam War, *The Lotus Unleashed* explores the Buddhist Uprisings in the Republic of Vietnam and details their important political consequences." *Spencer C. Tucker* "Serves to remind us of the challenges and pitfalls of American involvement in far-flung conflicts." *Tacoma News-Tribune* "Argues that the United States failed to prevent a Socialist victory because it never concerned itself with Vietnamese public opinion. . . . Topmiller's compelling argument makes his book useful in many settings." *Transformations* "Presents more evidence of the force of Vietnamese nationalism . . . well-researched and clearly written." *VVA Veteran* About the Author Robert J. Topmiller is assistant professor of history at Eastern Kentucky University.