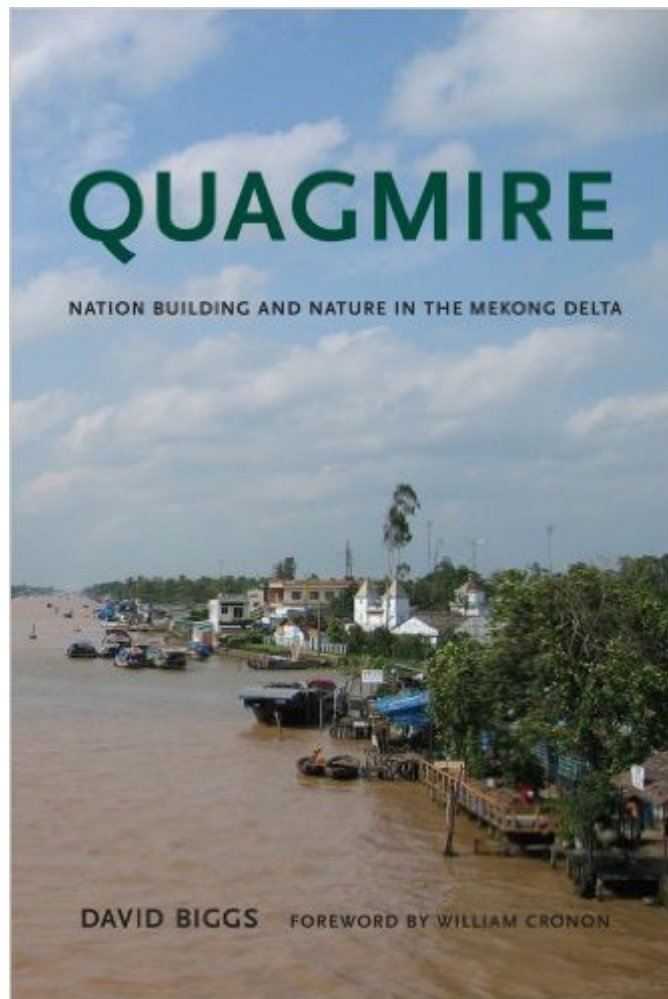


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# Quagmire: Nation-Building And Nature In The Mekong Delta (Weyerhaeuser Environmental Books)



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2012 George Perkins Marsh Prize for Best Book in Environmental History  
In the twentieth century, the Mekong Delta has emerged as one of Vietnam's most important economic regions. Its swamps, marshes, creeks, and canals have played a major role in Vietnam's turbulent past, from the struggles of colonialism to the Cold War and the present day. Quagmire considers these struggles, their antecedents, and their legacies through the lens of environmental history. Beginning with the French conquest in the 1860s, colonial reclamation schemes and pacification efforts centered on the development of a dense network of new canals to open land for agriculture. These projects helped precipitate economic and environmental crises in the 1930s, and subsequent struggles after 1945 led to the balkanization of the delta into a patchwork of regions controlled by the Viet Minh, paramilitary religious sects, and the struggling Franco-Vietnamese government. After 1954, new settlements were built with American funds and equipment in a crash program intended to solve continuing economic and environmental problems. Finally, the American military collapse in Vietnam is revealed as not simply a failure of policy makers but also a failure to understand the historical, political, and environmental complexity of the spaces American troops attempted to occupy and control. By exploring the delta as a quagmire in both natural and political terms, Biggs shows how engineered transformations of the Mekong Delta landscape - channelized rivers, a complex canal system, hydropower development, deforestation - have interacted with equally complex transformations in the geopolitics of the region. Quagmire delves beyond common stereotypes to present an intricate, rich history that shows how closely political and ecological issues are intertwined in the human interactions with the water environment in the Mekong Delta. Watch the book trailer: <http://www.youtube.com/user/UWashingtonPress#p/u/2/gp1-UltZqsk>

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

By focusing on human-environment interactions, David Biggs' *Quagmire* will make you rethink what you thought you knew about war, colonialism, and modern Vietnamese history. Just as Bill Cronin's classic, *Changes in the Land*, recast the colonial history of New England--and it is no coincidence that the famed environmental historian penned a heartfelt introduction to this "superb book"--Biggs presents a fundamentally new perspective. By closely examining the links between nation-building and the complexly watery Mekong Delta from the French colonial era and the Japanese occupation to the present, we begin to see larger stories and longer durations than our customary ones of swamps and swift boats. Not only do we see recurring challenges of road builders and canal dredgers in the nineteenth as well as twentieth century, and almost tidal patterns of deep-water state control and shallow-water resistance, but the border between anti-coloniality and nationalism itself becomes fluid, as states seek to expand and settlers move south, deploying new technologies yet always confronting a shifting, silting tangle of tidal mud and water. In attempting to impose grids and open waterways and roadways, there are parallels with the engineering efforts in other flood-prone deltas, but Biggs, who has lived and studied in the Mekong for years, lets this story, and its people, speak for itself. Concisely and beautifully written with minimal jargon, this would be a fabulous text for general interest, undergraduate courses in Southeast Asian studies, political and environmental history, as well as for students of U.S. military history.

*Quagmire* is a very readable book with a deceptively simple premise -- geography and geology matter. While Biggs does not delve into much of the colonial world of Vietnam -- either French or American -- his focus on water management in the Mekong Delta was the right move. Others have taken up the more sticky problems of 20th Century Vietnamese politics -- most notably Frank Logevall's *Embers of War* and Lien-Hang T. Nguyen's *Hanoi's War*. I wish I had started with *Quagmire* as it lays the fundamental, inescapable fact of the Mekong Delta. It is also a case study in the arrogance of invading, colonial, and hegemonic powers that feel only THEY know what is best for an indigenous population -- and the disasters when one regime after another, holding the same sorts of logical premises, cling to previous plans that did not (and never would) fit the situation. The

Mekong Delta's recurring water management problems are still not resolved, but one hopes that the local population will increasingly be afforded greater voice in determining its use and goals. Quagmire just might get the local inhabitants out of the quagmire caused by people who never belonged there in the first place.

This is a contents book, very rich in history, and that knows to express how things came to be like they are today. I have been a resident in the Mekong delta for 17 years, and I keep returning to David Biggs' book for reference or just for the good read. Biggs is very well informed, arguably the most up-to-date historian on the Mekong delta today, but he also writes a vivid and engaging prose. Some of the illustrations make me dream of large prints on my walls. (as we are approaching Christmas, I am thinking of the digging of Chaiyachong canal, by hand, with this lonesome manager on a horse, lost in the crowd) All in all, a very good book.

I got this just because my name was on it, and it was actually not a bad read. Quite interesting about how the nature of the Mekong delta has developed over the years. Did you know that the plants actually help purify the river water for locals to use for washing and bathing?

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