Larry Bonds Red Dragon Rising: Shock of War by Jim DeFelice

Trying To Think Of A Word To Describe - Maybe Predictable?

Under secret orders from the President, U.S. Army Major Zeus Murphy sabotages a Chinese invasion fleet on the eve of its assault against Vietnam. But after Murphy and fellow officer Win Christian are trapped behind enemy lines, Christian’s erratic behavior gives them away. The pair shoot their way out of a Chinese airport terminal, hijack a bus, then barely escape two truckloads of soldiers before disappearing into the night. Thus starts Zeus Murphy’s personal odyssey in the latest installment of the Red Dragon Rising series.

Back in America, President Chester Greene fails to convince Congress that the Chinese invasion of Vietnam is the first step in a plan to rule Asia—and eventually go to war with the U.S. Not even the Pentagon will support the President; top-ranking officers do everything they can to sabotage his orders.

After Zeus and Christian dodge a Chinese armored division and return to Vietnam, Zeus proposes a plan to blunt the tank attack. His commanding officer orders him to stand down. Zeus disobeys in an effort to help the Vietnamese woman he’s fallen in love with. Win Christian goes with him to prove he’s not a coward…within hours, both men are alone with a company of Vietnamese soldiers on the border, staring down the barrels of Chinese main battle tanks as they drive on Haiphong, starting a countdown to all-out war with the West.

In Larry Bonds Red Dragon Rising: Shock of War, New York Times bestselling authors Larry Bond and Jim DeFelice imagine a horrifying near-future immersed in global war.
I have mixed feelings about this series after the third of four installments.

The premise is strong for a technothriller: exploring a realistic scenario in which a rising but drought-stricken China invades its historic enemy Vietnam for its rice and oil, led by a strongman leader meanwhile trying to quell a hungry and restive population at home.

This is less sexy but ultimately more satisfying than the typical terrorists-stole-a-nuke plot. Bond and DiFelice get to explore in greater depth the politics constraining a dicey US intervention and the war strategizing that is among Bonds strong suits.

The down side is the way this particular series is built. Its based around scientist Josh MacArthur, who witnesses Chinese atrocities just inside the Vietnamese border at the invasions outset. His extraction from the wartorn country by CIA agent Mara Duncan so that he can bear witness occupies the first couple of books. The other premier character is Major Zeus Murphy, sent to Vietnam to bring his war-gaming expertise to bear on bolstering their defense against an overwhelmingly large enemy.

Im not that interested in MacArthur, nor any budding romance in the works between him and Duncan. Their long trek in Book 1 and the Chinese assassination attempts to stop him from testifying in Book 2 were by far as much as I wanted to read about him. The assassins character gave us a perspective from the Chinese side, but by Book 3 thats no longer a factor.

Murphy is more interesting. His considerations of how the Vietnamese might resist such an invasion and his experiences trying to communicate with a former US enemy in ambiguous and difficult circumstances are part of the appeal this series does have. His wartime romance with a lovely Vietnamese doctor add some zing, as well as the required my-relatives-died-fighting-the-US tensions any such romance would probably have.

But the plot is constrained by Americas tangential, so far, relationship to the conflict. The US isnt in it. Murphy has to work on the down low. His adventures in Hainan and escaping back into Vietnam, and then at the front as an advisor, provide some decent action, but only allow a worms-eye view of the conflict.

The action revolves back to Washington where President Greene maneuvers, where MacArthur finds himself assaulted in the press by Chinese-supported members of Congress, where Duncan frets about her career. And it revolves out to sea, where destroyer Captain Dirk Silas patrols the Gulf of Tonkin to probe Chinese naval forces but with orders not to engage. The spooks plot to get some anti-tank rockets sent into Vietnam, but its not much.

Were tap-dancing around the edge of a really interesting war, but one we dont see much of through the eyes of its main combatants, China and
Vietnam. It falls short of Tom Clancy's war-breaks-out plots, and also of Bonds lesser-known Vortex with its what-if scenario, written in the 1980s, of the South African apartheid regime invading its neighbors.

In both of those you have multiple views of the hot war itself from its major participants. Here, not so much. Murphy's internal conflict, between following orders to advise Vietnam but not get directly involved in the fighting, and his growing professional and then personal loyalty to a de facto ally, are what keep the third book going, but the authors have made it bear too much of the responsibility to keep the story moving ahead.

The strength of it is its realism: the US, needing to deter China but agonizing over yet another ground war in Asia, would probably temporize much like this while working secretly to support Vietnam. A Chinese invasion might go as this one does - overwhelming force slowed by Chinese commanders' hesitance to seize initiative or take risks, and creative Vietnamese resistance to a stronger invader. But it's the Chinese and the Vietnamese doing the fighting, and we need to see a little more from their point of view.

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