

Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965

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Back at the end of the 1980s, when I was a lowly teaching assistant at the Pennsylvania State University, I had the good fortune to work on an undergraduate course on the Vietnam War directed by the great Vietnam scholar William Duiker. Duiker's course was very popular. One of the attractions was a role-playing exercise where a small group of student volunteers would adopt the roles of members of the National Security Council at key watershed moments in the development of the First and Second Indochina Wars. We would go out to Duiker's house where, over coffee and soft drinks, the members of the NSC would debate the issues and make their policy recommendations to the president, played by Duiker himself. These deliberations would then be presented to the entire lecture group on campus for debate. One of the things that struck me forcibly about these sessions was that, despite the prevailing wisdom on the war, which had come to see it as a serious mistake, when confronted with the information available to the protagonists at the time, these students, most too young to remember much if anything about the conflict, would arrive at the same conclusions and make the same recommendations regarding American policy and strategy in Southeast Asia as the persons whose roles they played.

Mark Moyar would not be surprised to learn that the Penn State students found it perfectly understandable and logical that, in the context of the times they were studying, the United States should commit itself to the preservation of a non-communist South Vietnam, for he sees the war as a 'noble cause'. He would, however, more than likely quibble at the precise strategies by which the students thought such an objective should best be pursued, because he also thinks that this noble cause was 'improperly executed'. As such, Moyar's book is heir to the tradition of 'revisionist' interpretations of the Vietnam War, by contrast to conventional or

‘orthodox’ interpretations, which tend to see the war as ‘wrong-headed and unjust’ (p. xi).

Triumph Forsaken is the first volume of what will be a two-volume history of the Vietnam War, but it did not start out that way. Moyar tells us that he set out to write a short single-volume history of the war synthesised from secondary sources, but in the course of his research he discovered that much of the conventional wisdom about the war seemed faulty, and, in order to set the record straight, a much more extensive work, based on primary research, was necessary. In fact, Moyar probably set out from the view that much of the conventional wisdom needed to be challenged, since his earlier work on the CIA’s counter-insurgency Phoenix Programme (1) also falls into the revisionist school, and while Moyar himself insists that there is much in the works of ‘orthodox’ historians with which he agrees, he is actually at variance with so many of the conventional interpretations of the Vietnam historical record that space prevents us from dealing with all but a few of the most significant here.

As befits a general history, Moyar’s work is largely narrative, tracing the history of the Second Indochina War from its beginnings immediately after the Geneva Agreement that concluded the First Indochina War to the deployment of major United States ground forces to South Vietnam in 1965, but as the gestation of Moyar’s work suggests, it is very thoroughly researched in primary sources, including extensive use of communist Vietnamese materials, much of which has only recently become available to the scholar. The result is a work that is much more detailed than the average general history, particularly as regards its coverage of Vietnamese perspectives and the specifically military side of the conflict, supported by extensive endnotes. It reads well too, being written in a clear and vigorous style that is only occasionally marred by a grating informality—Kennedy’s intellectual advisers are referred to as ‘brainy’ civilians (p. 416); the H-21 helicopter, which was indeed known as the ‘Flying Banana’ on account of its shape, is continuously referred to as such in Moyar’s account of the Battle of Ap Bac in January 1963; but these are minor irritations.

Shortly after its conclusion, a scholarly consensus on the Vietnam War began to accrete as the ‘orthodox’ view. Some of the key aspects of the consensus are as follows:

Orthodox historians discovered that far from being an agent of the Soviet monolith, the North-Vietnamese Leader, Ho Chi Minh, was actually a nationalist first and a communist only insofar as this would serve his nationalist cause. Thus the United States found itself opposing the forces of nationalism in South Vietnam and supporting a regime that drew extensively on the class that had administered France’s Indochinese colonies for her.

The South-Vietnamese leader, Ngo Dinh Diem, was not himself tainted by the colonial connection, but neither, according to the orthodox school, was he popular. He was the reactionary leader of a repressive and corrupt regime, representative only of the Catholic minority in South Vietnam. While the United States pressed political and economic reforms on the Diem regime, he could never fully acquiesce to them, as to do so could only be at the expense of the same minority class that the government represented. Nor would the removal of Diem resolve this problem, as historical events were to prove, because South-Vietnamese political institutions were intrinsically reactionary.

American support for the Republic of Vietnam was fundamentally flawed, then, in moral terms, but it was also justified by the United States government in strategic terms. However, the orthodox historians also adjudged these strategic arguments bankrupt. South Vietnam was not strategically significant in itself, and Ho could hardly be China's agent because of the long-established enmity between Vietnam and its powerful neighbour to the north. If Ho were simply fighting for the unification of his country, and was not an agent of the Soviet Union or China, then South Vietnam could not be one of Eisenhower's falling dominoes; indeed, the orthodox historians declared the domino theory itself invalid. Subsequent historical events appeared to prove this: in the wake of the American defeat in Vietnam the Asian dominoes did not fall beyond the immediate confines of Indochina. Logically, if Ho was a nationalist and not a communist, the United States had no strategic interest in South Vietnam, and if the Diem regime was unpopular, then American intervention must have been a mistake.

What is more, the primarily-conventional military strategy adopted by the United States to achieve its aims in Vietnam was, the orthodox historians found, incapable of realizing them. Despite an eventual strength of more than half a million American soldiers in South Vietnam, the kind of military commitment actually required to have any chance at all of securing victory was never acceptable to the United States government or the American people. Yet despite the increasing obviousness that the war could not be won, the United States was reluctant to withdraw. Consequently it remained bogged down in a long drawn-out stalemate, until political exhaustion forced a peace agreement on terms that had seemed unacceptable at the outset.

Moyar's achievement is perhaps at its greatest in his appreciation of the political and cultural realities of Vietnam itself. Thus, his work is also an unlikely heir to the limited tradition of cultural assessments of the war represented by Frances Fitzgerald's *Fire in the Lake* (1972) and Loren Baritz's *Backfire* (1985) [\(2\)](#). However, where those works tend to find in favour of the orthodox view, Moyar's perspective on Vietnamese culture leads him in the opposite direction.

Fundamentally, Moyar finds that Ho Chi Minh was indeed a committed agent of international communism, intent on spreading the revolution throughout Southeast Asia. What is more, while it is true that there was not a close relationship between Ho and the Soviet Union at the outset of the Second Indochina War, Moyar does find such a relationship between Ho and the communist People's Republic of China. In fact, says Moyar, no relic of historical antipathy clouded a cordial relationship between fraternal communist brothers Ho and Mao Zedong. This is not unreasonable. Vietnam had once been part of the Chinese empire, and after it won its independence it had been a tribute state, subject to periodic Chinese invasion for 900 years before the French came, but beating off every assault. However, the resulting Vietnam-China relationship might more accurately be described as one of mutual respect than lasting enmity. At times China had actually guaranteed Vietnam's security, and there had also been extensive cultural exchanges between Vietnam and China during the tribute period with the result that Vietnam had become heavily Sinicized. Moyar's revisionist picture of Ho's relationship with China would suggest that the contemporary United States analysis of Ho's motives was correct, and, in the cold war context of the time, that the strong American desire to prevent Ho's success and the expansion of his ambitions beyond Vietnam and Indochina was understandable.

As with his view of Ho, Moyar's take on Diem departs from the orthodox view. Certainly Diem was an authoritarian, and he did drag his feet over American-requested reforms, but again Moyar's appreciation of East-Asian culture and South-Vietnamese politics lead him to conclude that Diem's policy was essentially wise. South Vietnam had no democratic tradition, and Diem averred that wartime was not the moment to begin to build one. The Vietnamese would have been puzzled by the idea that they should like their leader; the important point was that they should respect his authority. The way to achieve this respect was to be shown to be strong and effective. Failure to do so would be to lose face and therefore authority. Under these circumstances political liberalization was actually counter-productive and Diem's very authoritarianism was the source of his 'popularity' in Vietnamese terms. Only among the chattering classes in Saigon were there grumblings about his failure to provide the kind of liberal political environment to which the Americans aspired for South Vietnam.

In this view, Diem's suppression of Buddhist unrest in 1963 was essential for the preservation of his authority, and his reluctance to do so because of American pressure actually contributed to his generals' decision to topple him in a coup. Indeed, it had been the generals who had ordered the clearing of the pagodas in August 1963 and not Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, as a number of American 'experts' insisted. In the process of explaining this, Moyar reveals that the Buddhist uprising was most likely communist inspired, and he questions the widely-held view that the majority of South Vietnamese were Buddhists. According to Moyar, at most the Buddhists represented just over a quarter of the population of South Vietnam and there were at least as many Confucians, but here he places rather too much faith in categories that barely existed in Vietnam in real terms. In fact the majority of South Vietnamese adhered to an amalgam of religious ideas that drew on Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, and animist traditions. The upshot is the same, however—that the majority of Vietnamese rural dwellers had little knowledge of, and even less interest in, the Buddhist crisis, which was primarily an urban phenomenon.

Following Diem's overthrow, the very political liberalization that Diem had resisted was, according to Moyar, a major contributor to the collapse of the South-Vietnamese war effort between 1963 and 1965, and, interestingly, when Premier Nguyen Cao Ky cracked down on the press in 1965, the United States was no longer so enthusiastic about championing its freedom. The difficulty for Diem was that Americans believed that part of the answer to South Vietnam's problems was to make it like the United States. However, American political nostrums did not suit the Vietnamese cultural landscape, and Diem's very resistance to reform proved that he was not a puppet of the United States as many orthodox historians contend. The folly of American efforts to force liberal democratic reforms on Diem is perhaps the most significant lesson of Vietnam for current United States policy in Iraq where Americans (and British) also seek to import alien political and social structures into an ancient and proud culture that they do not fully understand, perhaps with similarly disastrous results.

As regards the significance of Vietnam in the United States national interest, Moyar agrees with the orthodox school that Vietnam was not intrinsically important in itself. However, given Ho's communism and his relationship with China, plus considerable evidence that Vietnam's East-Asian neighbours were concerned about the consequences of the spread of the Chinese communist bacillus to their borders such that they might be forced to make accommodations with the PRC, Moyar is convinced that the United States was justified in fearing that if the South Vietnamese domino should fall then the repercussions would be felt in areas that were more strategically significant, including Thailand, Indonesia, and even Japan.

Americans were puzzled by their defeat in Vietnam. How could the most powerful nation on earth have been defeated by a ragged bunch of peasant guerrillas? This question and the development of the orthodox view that the war was unwinnable have made Vietnam a fascinating problem begging for a solution, a sort of military 'Rubik's Cube' pondered over by scholars, generals, and armchair strategists, all searching for their own magic bullet which would have assured victory for the United States. Moyar clearly thinks that the war could have been won. In fact, according to Moyar, in 1962 and 1963, at precisely the time that American journalists David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan were saying that the South-Vietnamese war effort was in disarray and the United States began to cast about for a replacement for Diem, South Vietnam was winning

the war. Unfortunately, largely as a consequence of the actions of the media and their misreading of the Buddhist crisis, the United States and influential South Vietnamese turned against Diem with the result that he was deposed by a military coup and murdered.

Diem's death ushered in a period of political turmoil in South Vietnam, during which the quality of the South-Vietnamese war effort really did deteriorate, and North Vietnam was emboldened to administer the coup de grace by launching an initiative to destroy the South-Vietnamese Army (ARVN). With the ARVN reeling from North-Vietnamese Army and Viet Cong main force attacks, and with its strategic reserve haemorrhaging away, the Johnson administration was faced with the choice of engaging major American ground forces or withdrawing its support for South Vietnam. Johnson chose the former course, but 'what would ultimately doom Johnson was neither the illness of the patient nor a faulty diagnosis, but a poor choice of remedy' (p. 416). Moyar is critical, therefore, of the Johnson administration's decision to commit major United States ground forces inside South Vietnam, because he says that other more viable strategies were available such as deploying American forces along the seventeenth parallel and in Laos in order to choke off communist infiltration into South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Johnson was wrong to reject these measures, says Moyar, as a result of faulty intelligence and incorrect advice from civilian aides that such initiatives might result in a wider war with China.

Of course the implication here is that, if pursued, the strategies which Moyar favours for 1963 and 1965 were potential war winners. Maybe so, but there is a whiff of the counter-factual about this because the 1963 strategy was not sustained after Diem's death, the second strategy was never tried, and we cannot, of course, say with any certainty how the communists would have responded to either of them over time. Ultimately, it is difficult to avoid the fact that the communists always reserved the right to set the pace and intensity of the war, even if the United States deployed troops in Laos, scaling back conventional operations in favour of debilitating guerrilla warfare until the Americans tired of the conflict. The only situation in which this would clearly not have been the case would have been if the United States had decided on a full-scale invasion and occupation of North Vietnam, but in such a situation Chinese intervention really could not have been discounted and the Johnson administration was never prepared to countenance such a strategy.

What bothers Moyar about the orthodox school is not so much the variance between their interpretations of the war and those of revisionists like himself, but the outright refusal by some orthodox historians to consider alternative interpretations of the war which do not, in Frederik Logevall's words, regard it as 'axiomatic' that the United States should not have fought in Vietnam (p. xii). This is indeed to be deplored, but in embracing the revisionist cause Moyar takes more chances with his academic credibility than he is prepared to admit, for while the revisionists tend to see the Vietnam War as a noble cause, theirs is not necessarily a particularly noble tradition. Most of the early-revisionist publications were by United States military personnel who had been directly concerned with the conflict. While General Westmoreland, Admiral Sharpe, General Momyer, and Colonel Summers were officers and gentlemen to a man, and their works are not without interest, they made rather poor historians (3). Worse still are the legions of internet zealots who are convinced of the rightness of the American cause in Vietnam, regardless of any possible evidence to the contrary, and certain that they could have run the war better than the civilians charged with the task at the time. There have, however, been serious revisionist histories of the Vietnam War: Guenter Lewy's *America in Vietnam* (1978) (4) was an excellent early example, and like Lewy before him, the sheer scholarship behind Moyar's book demands that we take his views seriously.

Notes

1. M. Moyar, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (Annapolis, 1997). [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. F. Fitzgerald, *Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam* (New York, 1972); L. Baritz, *Backfire: A History of How American Culture Led us into Vietnam and Made Us Fight the Way We Did* (New York, 1985). [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. W. C. Westmoreland, *A Soldier Reports* (New York, 1980), U.S.G. Sharp, *Strategy for Defeat: Vietnam in Retrospect*

- (Novato, CA, 1998), W. W. Momyer, *Airpower in Three Wars* (Washington, D.C., 1978); H. G. Summers, Jr., *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (New York, 1984). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. G. Lewy, *America and Vietnam* (New York, 1978). [Back to \(4\)](#)

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