

Triumph Forsaken Roundtable *Review* Review by William Stueck



Reviewed Work:

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Review by William Stueck, University of Georgia

The author wishes to thank Richard Immerman, Chen Jian, and Qiang Zhai for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this review.

For the sake of full disclosure, I begin with the promotional blurb I provided for Cambridge University Press for the book under review: “Mark Moyar has produced the best ‘revisionist’ study to date of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam. Engagingly written and broadly researched, this book establishes Moyar as the leading voice of a new generation of historians intent on challenging conventional wisdom.” This statement was not an endorsement of the book’s central argument, but rather a reflection of the beliefs (1) that Moyar is a serious scholar whose work deserves careful consideration, especially because of his use of sources from the North Vietnamese side, and (2) that reexamining the evidence and arguments for the orthodox view is a healthy development, especially for people such as me who spent a good portion of the late 1960s and early 1970s either protesting the war, dodging the draft, or a combination of the two. The extensive early attention devoted to *Triumph Forsaken* reinforces my sense that the field of diplomatic history is alive and well.

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Since I am no expert on the Vietnam War, I want to avoid any pretense at making authoritative judgments about the arguments and evidence Moyar puts forth. Rather, as a person who over the years has dabbled a little in U.S. primary sources on Vietnam and more than a little in the English-language secondary literature, I will comment on the arguments that strike me as most persuasive, those that strike me as least so, and where the debate that is just beginning might most fruitfully focus.

In a text of 416 pages, Moyar devotes a mere 31 in getting through the Geneva Accords of the summer of 1954. In that brief space, however, he makes assertions about Vietnamese history, the legitimacy of U.S. concerns for Vietnam after World War II, the military balance in Indochina in early 1954, and the negotiations at Geneva during June and July of that year that represent important foundations for what comes later. He emphasizes factionalism, disunity, authoritarianism, and violence in Vietnam’s political history and China’s relatively benign approach to Vietnam over the centuries. When China did intervene militarily in Vietnam, Moyar asserts, it was generally because it was dragged in at the behest of one of the smaller land’s warring factions. Furthermore, according to Moyar, by 1945 Ngo Dinh Diem possessed nationalist credentials with his countrymen comparable to those of Ho Chi

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Minh, who in fact was a staunch internationalist holding “to the Leninist principle that Communist nations should subordinate their interests” to those of the broader revolutionary movement (9). American concern from 1949 onward that the fall of Vietnam to Communism would produce a “domino” effect in the region was sound, but its unwillingness to provide France with air support in the spring of 1954 was a serious mistake, as such aid probably would have averted the debacle at Dienbienphu and reinforced the essentially favorable military position that the French enjoyed at the time. Even after Dienbienphu, Ho recognized the weaknesses of his own forces and readily accepted partition of Vietnam rather than a continued armed struggle. That partition along the 17th parallel was not far from the division of the country from the late sixteenth century through most of the eighteenth.

Moyar is on strongest ground in his assertions regarding Vietnamese political history. The secondary literature makes it hard to dispute that unity was the exception rather than the rule or that Vietnam lacked a liberal tradition. Those facts, in turn, suggest that partition somewhere in the area of the 17th parallel was far from a historical aberration and that Vietnamese leaders need to be evaluated by some standard other than a predisposition toward liberal democracy. In addition, recent scholarship suggests that Ngo Dinh Diem possessed personal qualities and nationalist credentials that made him a potentially viable alternative to Ho, although Diem’s absence from Vietnam for most of the 1940s and early 1950s greatly complicated his task. Finally, although the nature of China’s traditional relationship with Vietnam may be debated endlessly, there can be no doubt that from early 1950 onward the People’s Republic of China gave important support for the communist-led Vietminh, support that was essential to the French defeat at Dienbienphu.

Moyar is less persuasive in other areas. For example, he asserts that “the French and their Vietnamese cohorts were on the verge of crushing the Vietminh in early 1954,” a claim based largely on *Khrushchev Remembers* and Hungarian diplomat Janos Radvanyi’s recollection of statements in 1959 by Vietminh General Vo Nguyen Giap. Former Soviet premier and party leader Nikita Khrushchev’s memoirs provide immensely useful insights and have been proven accurate on numerous issues, but they must be used with caution. Khrushchev’s account of events regarding Indochina from April through July 1954 is particularly problematic. He is clearly wrong in stating that “at the first session of the [Geneva] conference, the French head of state, Mendès-France, proposed to restrict the northern reach of French forces to the 17th parallel,” a “surprise” to the Soviets, who regarded the line as “the absolute maximum” of what could be attained by the Communist side. In fact, Mendès-France did not become French premier until June 18, over six weeks into the conference, he initially insisted on the 18th parallel as the demarcation line, and the Soviets consistently hoped that the demarcation line would be no further north than the 16th parallel.¹ Moyar quotes Khrushchev as having been told by Zhou Enlai in early April

¹ Nikita Khrushchev, *Khrushchev Remembers*, trans. by Strobe Talbott (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), pp. 482-83. For a recent account based largely on Soviet documents, see Ilya V. Gaiduk, *Confronting Vietnam: Soviet Policy toward the Indochina Conflict, 1954-1963* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2003), 21-25.

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that Ho characterized the Vietminh military position as “hopeless” (27), a statement that does not appear in the leading secondary sources on the Chinese side, books by Qiang Zhai and Chen Jian.² To be sure, it is clear that the Vietminh suffered serious losses at Dienbienphu during the early months of 1954, that Vietminh troops experienced morale problems in early April, at which time victory was not assured, and that Ho lobbied at the time for more aid from Beijing, including Chinese troops. Yet Moyer’s use of *Khrushchev Remembers* to put the Vietminh in a position of extreme distress—as having by the end of March suffered “devastating losses”—is dubious. Even if Ho did say to Zhou what Khrushchev claims, the Vietminh leader had every reason to exaggerate conditions in order to get more Chinese aid, especially given the upcoming Geneva conference. Even if Radvanyi’s account of Giap’s lecture to a group of Hungarian officials five years after the event is precise, the lecture could easily have been an exaggeration to dramatize Giap’s own brilliance and the heroism of the Vietnamese Communists.³ Giap’s 1964 published account as well as later oral accounts to journalist Stanley Karnow, after all, are quite different.⁴

Placing the Khrushchev and Radvanyi stories against some undisputed facts does not strengthen Moyer’s interpretation. The Vietminh outnumbered the surrounded French by five to one in manpower at Dienbienphu, they controlled the high ground on which their ample Chinese-supplied artillery and antiaircraft weapons were protected through camouflage and deployment partially underground, and they hid and shielded their troops through carefully constructed tunnels and trenches. During the first stage of their offensive in mid-March, Vietminh units captured three key outer French defense posts and, through artillery and antiaircraft fire, closed the enemy airstrip, thus greatly restricting France’s capacity to resupply and reinforce its troops. The French suffered over a thousand casualties, hundreds of defections by T’ai soldiers, and a crisis of command both at the tactical and strategic levels. Paris’s desperate appeal to Washington was not without cause.

It is entirely possible that U.S. bombing of the high ground around Dienbienphu could have brought some relief to the French. However, Giap had constructed in-ground shelters for his manpower and heavy weaponry with great care and monsoon rains hit the area harder and earlier than usual in mid-April, flooding the French-held low ground and reducing the potential for precision bombing. The bottom line is that, with any outcome short of the annihilation of Communist forces at Dienbienphu, the Vietminh was far better positioned than the French to continue the military struggle over a prolonged period. The Vietminh already occupied substantial portions of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia and Mao was

² Qiang Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars, 1950-1975* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), pp. 46-49; Chen Jian, *Mao’s China and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 134-38.

³ Janos Radvanyi, *Delusion and Reality: Gambits, Hoaxes, and Diplomatic One-Upmanship in Vietnam* (South Bend, Indiana: Gateway Editions, 1978), pp. 8-9. Radvanyi’s prudence in accepting the accounts of others is called into question by his unquestioning acceptance of Khrushchev’s account.

⁴ Vo Nguyen Giap, *Dien Bien Phu* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Press, 1964); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, rev. & updated ed. (New York: Viking, 1991), 204-14.

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actively planning large-scale aid to his ally over a protracted period, all at a time when public support for the war in France was in decline.⁵ New evidence from the Vietnamese side may eventually alter prevailing wisdom. At this point, however, the most plausible reading of Ho Chi Minh's perspective in the early spring of 1954 is that, after fighting the French for nearly eight years, he was anxious to win a decisive victory that would lead to the early independence and unification of Vietnam under his control, but that he was far from desperate or unprepared to fight on indefinitely.

This interpretation also fits Ho's course following the French surrender at Dienbienphu, and it does not jibe with Moyar's account. Again the direct documentation on Ho's thinking is far from conclusive, but Zhai, Chen, and Ilya V. Gaiduk (on the Soviet side) all present substantial evidence of discontent within the Vietminh leadership over Chinese and Soviet pressure for partition, especially at the 17th parallel, and for withdrawal of forces from Laos and Cambodia. True, Ho was well aware of his ongoing dependence on Chinese materiel support, which surely dictated caution in resisting Beijing's views; yet as a Vietnamese leader he could hardly have helped but possess local priorities divergent from Mao, who had recently experienced a costly military struggle with the Americans in Korea and faced the unfinished business of securing Taiwan to complete his own country's unification. Although Moyar cites Zhai, Chen, and Gaiduk on some specifics, he ignores other details as well as these authors' conclusions.

The above excursion into Moyar's use of sources in a specific case falls well short of dismantling the overall argument of the book. It does suggest, however, that such key areas as his portrayal of the state of the war in South Vietnam during 1962 and 1963 and Mao's willingness to intervene with Chinese ground forces during 1964 and 1965—or lack thereof—require the same kind of scrutiny. In the first case, Moyar argues that the war was going fairly well for the Diem government and would have gone even better had the United States been more supportive of its leader. Moyar bases his claims largely on pro-Diem elements among U.S. observers and heretofore untapped North Vietnamese sources that he did not read but had translated for him. I am persuaded that at least part of Diem's growing problems in the countryside during 1963 were a result of increased aid to the Vietcong from North Vietnam and China, that the United States erred in pressing Diem to accommodate Buddhist dissidents and in giving a South Vietnamese military faction the green light for a coup in the fall of 1963, and that anti-Diem journalists such as Neil Sheehan and David Halberstam carried more weight in the United States than their knowledge or wisdom warranted. Nonetheless, I find suspect the glowing description by Moyar of Diem's leadership and his downplaying of the issue of land distribution. Moyar is certainly correct to rebut orthodox portrayals of Diem as an unthinking reactionary and to emphasize security as a primary concern of the peasants, but the extent to which he goes in these directions strikes me as excessive. That Moyar sometimes uses block citations in the middle or at the end of declaratory paragraphs, thus making it virtually impossible to identify which point is supported by which source, does not inspire confidence. Over the

⁵ On Mao's plans, see Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 47-48.

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next decade a new generation of scholars, armed with appropriate language skills and a determination to uncover new materials in archives in Vietnam and France, are likely to have much to say on these matters.

There also remains much to uncover on Chinese intentions regarding Vietnam in 1964 and 1965. It is well known, of course, that Chinese troops began moving into North Vietnam in May 1965 to assist with logistics and man anti-aircraft weapons. Rather than see this fact as an indication that China would have sent troops into North Vietnam at any point before that had the United States crossed the 17th parallel, Moyar argues that it was U.S. timidity during the summer and fall of 1964 that emboldened Mao to commit forces to his ally to the south. Moyar views as weak China's response to U.S. bombing of the North after the Gulf of Tonkin incident. "After the Gulf of Tonkin reprisals," Moyar claims, "in violation of previous promises, the Chinese made clear to Hanoi that if American forces invaded North Vietnam, China would not send its troops to fight the Americans." (p. 321) To support the assertion, he cites an account of an October 5, 1964 meeting between Mao and two North Vietnamese leaders in Beijing that is translated and published through the Cold War International History Project.⁶ Yet the document is ambiguous. Neither Chen Jian nor Qiang Zhai, the leading authorities on Chinese policy at this time, interpret it as Moyar does.⁷ Nor do they regard China's response to U.S. bombing of North Vietnam in August as weak. Moyar is correct in stating that the available evidence suggests that China's position at this time was less committal than it had been earlier in the year or during the spring and summer of 1965, but it is a stretch to suggest that Mao would not have intervened on a major scale in late 1964 had the United States invaded the North. As on the Diem issue, while new evidence may prove Moyar correct, the weight of the current documentation is against him.

A better chance existed that Mao would not have sent troops had the United States invaded Laos, especially if it restricted itself to southern areas being used by the North Vietnamese for infiltration routes into South Vietnam. Yet Moyar fails to analyze potential logistical problems for American forces in launching such a campaign during the second half of 1964. Overall, if we accept Moyar's argument that the fall of South Vietnam in the mid-1960s would have led to a major erosion of the U.S. position in Asia and perhaps worldwide, rapid American escalation of the war in August 1964 may make sense, but the prudence and/or feasibility of carrying the ground war to North Vietnam and Laos remains doubtful. Given the internal problems faced by the South Vietnamese government during 1964, it is also

⁶ Odd Arne Westad, Chen Jian, Stein Tonnesson, Nguyen Vu Tung, and James G. Hershberg (eds.), "77 Conversations Between Chinese and Foreign Leaders on the Wars in Indochina, 1964-1977," Working Paper No. 22, Cold War International History Project (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, May 1998), 74-77.

⁷ James G. Hershberg and Chen Jian, "Reading and Warning the Likely Enemy: China's Signals to the United States about Vietnam in 1965," *International History Review* 27(March 2005): 62. Hershberg and Chen state simply that Mao "did not offer Chinese direct military intervention in response to the invasion." See also Zhai, *China and the Vietnam Wars*, 133.

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doubtful that a giant infusion of U.S. armed forces a year earlier than it actually occurred would have brought victory over a relatively brief period and at less than an enormous cost in life and treasure.

This leaves us with Moyar's analysis of the domino theory, which is the most extensive to date (see especially pp. 376-91). Moyar asserts, rightly I believe, that the fact that dominoes beyond Indochina did not fall after South Vietnam went Communist in 1975 does not necessarily mean that a similar outcome would have resulted if South Vietnam had gone Communist a decade earlier. Indonesia, after all, was far more firmly anti-Communist in 1975 than it had been in 1965, Thailand was much stronger, and Chinese influence was far less threatening. Moyar briefly examines the positions of governments in and the internal conditions of anti-Communist nations on the Pacific rim and concludes that, in all likelihood, an American withdrawal from Vietnam during 1965 would have had a devastating effect on U.S. alliances and the anti-Communist cause in the region and that the United States would have wound up fighting somewhere else, most probably in Indonesia, under even less favorable conditions than in South Vietnam.

Moyar makes a strong case, but I still have reservations. Most important, with the countries I know best, South Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, it is unlikely that a U.S. withdrawal from South Vietnam would have seriously compromised American alliances. Moyar is correct in claiming that leaders in South Korea and Taiwan and, to a lesser extent, Japan favored U.S. escalation in Vietnam; yet the option of abandoning the U.S. security system lacked strong appeal, even if the American government proved unreliable in defending its South Vietnamese ally. For one thing, where else could the three countries find protection? Japan had the most viable option of the three, a turn toward neutrality, as its boundaries were less threatened than the other two. Even so, Japan was in the midst of a U.S.-brokered settlement with South Korea that could not help but provide economic benefits over the long term, it possessed a strong, not to mention privileged, trade relationship with the United States and a profitable one with western Europe as well, and it even carried on significant trade with China, despite American reticence. The spread of Communism through Southeast Asia would not necessarily have precluded trade with the area. Economically, breaking the alliance with the United States was potentially much more disruptive to Japan than sticking to it. What's more, the United States had never concluded security treaties with South Vietnam as it had with Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan. So long as it countered a withdrawal from South Vietnam with a reinforcement of commitments to the others, the loss of confidence on the part of the others arguably would have been minimal. Moyar essentially concedes that the same would have been the case with Australia and New Zealand, and I would add the Philippines to the list.

Moyar is on stronger ground with regard to Thailand and Indonesia. In the first case, though, the United States would have retained the option of offering a military alliance, which it had never done with South Vietnam, and the stationing of troops. Despite turmoil at the top, Thailand had a much more functional government and social system than did South Vietnam and it had historically feared expansion by China and Vietnam. Furthermore, the United States could have made military commitments to Malaya and

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Singapore, which given their size, location, and relatively stable internal situations, were readily defensible. Control of one side of the Strait of Malacca, a major strategic prize, should have been sufficient to keep it open to shipping. Indonesia was the biggest problem, but even here, it is far from clear that the conservative military, if given support by the United States, would have done anything other than what it actually did in the fall of 1965, namely purge the Communists and overthrow the increasingly leftist regime of Sukarno. What, after all, would they have preferred to rely upon, the good will of the Communists if they seized power or the immediate assistance of the United States? In other words, much of the impact of a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam would have been determined by what Washington did as a follow-up.

Moyar does an excellent job of documenting the very real fears of President Johnson and his top advisers during 1965, but in becoming their advocate, he overstates the most likely consequences of a retreat in Vietnam rather than escalation. This overstatement includes not only his estimates of the reactions of anti-Communist governments and groups but the capacity of China, about to become embroiled in the Cultural Revolution, to consolidate its position in Southeast Asia and possibly beyond. Given the history of Vietnam, both before 1965 and after 1975, it is by no means certain that the Vietnamese Communists would have easily consolidated their position in the South, even after a U.S. withdrawal, or found China cooperative in expanding their power into Laos and Cambodia (or in pushing westward beyond that). Under any circumstances, Southeast Asia was destined to be in turmoil for some time and was just as likely to cause indigestion to a Communist China and a Communist Vietnam as a readily absorbed treat to be exploited for further gain. It was also likely to be a source of further acrimony between the Soviet Union and China. Moyar assists us in understanding why American leaders calculated differently at the time and he provides much grist for a healthy "argument without end." For this aging diplomatic historian, however, while sparking some embarrassing memories of the self-righteousness and naiveté of youth and generating a salutary mental workout, he has failed to persuade on the key point that the United States did the right thing in escalating the war in Vietnam during 1965.

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