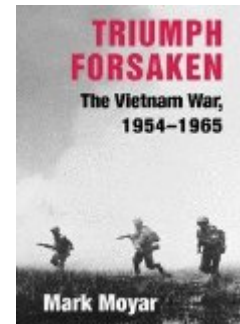


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Mark Moyar. *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. xxvi + 512 pp. \$32.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-86911-9.

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The Pitfalls of Historiography

Triumph Forsaken is a sweeping account of the period of the Vietnam War from 1954 to 1965. Up until 1960, American armed forces in the region were involved mainly in training and high-level planning for the South Vietnamese military. Over time, these advisors began to accompany smaller units in the field and occasionally engage in combat with the enemy. The most famous engagement of the period involving American advisors was the January 1963 Battle of Ap Bac, but there were many others. Mark Moyar's book does an excellent job of explaining America's military and diplomatic involvement in the war during this time. The book also provides an excellent overview of the internal politics of the war, both in South and North Vietnam. *Triumph Forsaken* would stand out as the best overall synthesis of the period if it were not for the other major goal of the book—to take a stand in the academic debates about the war and defend the “revisionist” historiography against its critics.

The literature on the Vietnam War has become far too vast to organize into two opposing categories of historiography, but this is exactly what Moyar attempts to do. His central premise is that most Vietnam scholarship can be defined as either orthodox or revisionist. The majority of academic histories, the author believes, fall into the orthodox mold, which “sees America's involvement in the war as wrongheaded and unjust” (p. xi). Orthodox historians contend that America was wrong to go to war in support of a government that lacked legitimacy with the Vietnamese people. Such efforts, these authors hold, are doomed to fail regardless of the military strategy employed. In contrast, revisionists see “the war as noble but

improperly executed” (p. xi). Adherents to this school argue that, with the right strategy, the war could have been won. Revisionists also tend to see the conflict as a war between two sovereign states (North and South Vietnam) rather than as an internal civil war in South Vietnam.

Moyar's first book, *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong* (1997), maintained that during the latter years of the war “the Americans and their South Vietnamese allies fought effectively and ethically, and that the South Vietnamese populace generally preferred the South Vietnamese government to the Communists during that period,” (p. xiii); but stops short of defending U.S. involvement in the war. *Triumph Forsaken* goes the full distance. It attempts to defend the U.S. government's efforts in Vietnam, arguing that had it not been for the intervention, American credibility in the region would have declined precipitously and other Asian countries would have succumbed to Communism. In short, Moyar, a professor at the Marine Corps University, believes that the domino theory is valid. “Communism's ultimate failure to knock over dominoes in Asia was not inevitable,” he claims, “but was instead the result of obstacles that the United States threw in Communism's path by intervening in Vietnam” (p. xxi).

Moyar's defense of the domino theory rests heavily on his analysis of the concurrent Indonesian situation under President Sukarno. Sukarno, Indonesia's first president was deposed in 1965 by a handful of right-wing generals led by Major General Suharto. New scholarship on

the 1965 Indonesian coup suggests that Suharto's success in toppling Sukarno and suppressing Communism in the archipelago was "influenced by the U.S. determination in South Vietnam" (p. 382). Recent interviews with participants in those events indicate that senior Indonesian military leaders "would not have resisted the Communists" had the United States pulled out of Vietnam (p. 382). Had Indonesia fallen, reasons the author, other Southeast Asian dominoes would have toppled in short order.

The primary strength of *Triumph Forsaken* is the author's command of the sources. He fleshes out a lot of new substance from documents in the National Archives and Presidential libraries, and offers new material from Vietnamese documents translated by Merle Pribbenow, an interpreter who served in Vietnam for five years with the CIA. To give just one example, Moyar's description of the 1965 battle of Dong Xoai is the best account of that intense early battle to date. Similarly, his analysis of the Battle of Ap Bac is superb. Far from being the "epitome of Diem government incompetence," as most journalists of the period portrayed it, Moyar reveals it as an opportunity lost for the Viet Cong (p. 205). The South Vietnamese forces did not "perform well," but "neither did they display ineptitude or cowardice" (p. 205). Furthermore, the fact that they ultimately took the objective, killing one hundred of the Viet Cong's best troops in the process, demonstrated that the government still "held the upper hand in the war at the time" (p. 202).

The major shortcoming of the book is the author's insistence on defending the revisionist thesis, point by point, even at the risk of stretching his sources to the limits. In discussing the battle of Dien Bien Phu, for example, he argues that the French were on the verge of crushing the Viet Minh, and that U.S. intervention in the battle might have turned a devastating French defeat into a victory over Communism. Moyar bases this argument heavily on the writings of Bui Tinh, a North Vietnamese defector whose writings tend to be highly politicized. Bui Tin apparently attended a lecture by Vo Nguyen Giap, where the General admitted that Dien Bien Phu was the "last desperate action of the Viet Minh army," and that his troops were in danger of running out of supplies and on the "verge of complete exhaustion" (p. 26). Even if this is true, a forceful American intervention could certainly have convinced China (and possibly the Soviet Union as well) to increase aid to their beleaguered Communist allies, either directly with ground troops or by greater assistance with logistics. In January 1950, Mao Zedong had promised Ho Chi Minh that "whatever China has and Vietnam needs, we will provide" (p. 22). Recognizing

the value of Chinese military aid throughout the First Indochinese War, the American Joint Chiefs of Staff told President Eisenhower in 1954 that if he wanted to put an end to the Viet Minh, he would have to destroy China.

Moyar is dismayed that revisionist historians are dismissed by some orthodox scholars as "ideologues" who "uncritically" defend American foreign policy during the period, but he lays himself open to the same criticism by making so many hard-to-defend claims (p. xii). For instance, his contention that President Ngo Dinh Diem was not an "obtuse, tyrannical reactionary," but a "highly effective leader" runs contrary to almost everything ever written about the South Vietnamese president (p. xiv). In *America's Longest War* (1986), George Herring, one of the most respected historians of the war, portrayed the Roman Catholic Diem as an authoritarian who ignored the needs of his people, ruthlessly suppressed dissent, and stirred a popular Buddhist uprising that ultimately led to his fall. Herring's view of Diem reflects the main currents of academic thought on the man, and is hardly radical.

Moyar, however, seeks to swim upstream and rehabilitate Diem's image. He wants to convince readers that the United States should never have helped depose Diem. "Supporting the coup of November 1963," writes Moyar, "was by far the worst American mistake of the Vietnam War" (p. xvii). Both North Vietnamese and American sources reveal that the war was "proceeding satisfactorily" until the coup (p. xvii). Afterwards, according to Moyar, senior South Vietnamese military officers had to focus more attention on internal power struggles than on the war. As a consequence, military effectiveness declined. In essence, the Diem coup prevented the South Vietnamese military from developing an effective counter-insurgency strategy.

Even if Diem were a skilled government administrator, his government still lacked legitimacy with many sections of the South Vietnamese populace. As Moyar himself admits, security was the most significant function of government for the rural peasant, and the National Liberation Front often did a better job of protecting rural hamlets than the South Vietnamese government. "Peasants who joined the Viet Cong insurgency," writes Moyar, "were attracted primarily by the Viet Cong's leadership capabilities and strength" (p. xiv). The South Vietnamese government under Diem simply could not compete in those two vital areas. As Herring wrote, "Diem's policies toward villages—traditionally the backbone of Vietnamese society—demonstrated a singular lack of concern and near callous irresponsibility." [1]

That Diem was a Roman Catholic in a country where such observants—many of whom were expatriates from North Vietnam—only comprised 10 percent of the population further undermined his effectiveness. Moyar, however, denies that Diem favored Catholics, even though five of eighteen cabinet ministers and twelve out of twenty-six provincial heads were Catholic. Moreover, Diem's brother, Ngo Dinh Nhu, ran the secret services, commanded the Special Forces, and was arguably the second most powerful figure in government. Madame Nhu (Ngo Dinh Nhu's wife) imposed Catholic values on the populace by convincing Diem to outlaw divorce, dancing, gambling, prostitution, contraception, and adultery. Finally, Diem's other brother, Ngo Dinh Thuc, served as archbishop of Hue and exerted tremendous influence over the president and his government. Therefore, to posit that Catholic patronage in government did not exist and that the large number of Catholics in civil service related more to their high education than favoritism verges on the polemical.

One could easily take issue with dozens of other assertions in this book, but in the interests of time and space, I will limit my discussion to one more: Laos. Moyar contends that John F. Kennedy's refusal to send American troops into Laos in the Fall of 1962 was a "disastrous concession to the enemy" that would forever hamper the ability of the South Vietnamese and their American ally to wage war effectively against the Communists (p. xv). While North Vietnam's use of Laos to infiltrate supplies and troops to the south certainly created enormous problems for the United States and South Vietnam, it was not the only infiltration route available to the Communists. Before the United States began assisting with maritime interdiction operations, seaborne infiltration was a viable means of supplying the south. Between February 1962 and February 1965, North Vietnamese vessels delivered 5,000 tons of supplies to the coast of South Vietnam. In 1964, Prince Norodom Sihanouk, the Cambodian chief of state, made this task significantly easier for the National Liberation Front by allowing North Vietnam to ship supplies to South Vietnam via the port of Sihanoukville in Cambodia. Between October 1966 and

July 1969, despite an improved U.S. embargo, these deliveries amounted to over 11,000 tons of arms and ammunition.[2] The Communists, in short, proved flexible in altering supply routes as the tactical situation changed on the battlefield. Therefore, Laos was not the linchpin holding together the Communist military effort in the South. Other avenues for supply existed throughout the conflict.

Triumph Forsaken is volume 1 in what Moyar promises will be a two-volume history of America's involvement in the Vietnam War. As its voluminous footnotes reveal, much of the research in this book is first rate. Had the author focused more on writing balanced history and less on defending revisionism, this book could have become the definitive history of the period. A first step for those wishing to justify America's involvement in Vietnam might be to defend the government the United States was backing, but Moyar's strident attempt to rehabilitate Diem is a bridge too far. If he had simply concentrated on more defensible tenets of the revisionist argument, his book might have achieved the sort of recognition garnered by H. R. McMaster's *Derelection of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies that Led to Vietnam* (1997), a work some scholars (including Moyar) classify as revisionist, but others view simply as a fresh interpretation of one group of actors in the conflict—the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Moyar, by contrast, paints himself into a corner by defining himself as a staunch revisionist and then setting out to debunk all of the major orthodox claims, starting with the strongest (i.e. the legitimacy of the South Vietnamese government). It is far better for an author to avoid the pitfalls of historiography, chart his or her own course, and then let the reviewers argue about where the book lay in the canon of literature on the war.

Notes

[1]. George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 64-65.

[2]. Victor Daniels and Judith C. Erdheim, "Game Warden," January 1976, CRC 284, Center for Naval Analysis, A-2-A-6.

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