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978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

TRIUMPH FORSAKEN

Drawing on a wealth of new evidence from all sides, *Triumph Forsaken* overturns most of the historical orthodoxy on the Vietnam War. Through the analysis of international perceptions and power, it shows that South Vietnam was a vital interest of the United States. The book provides many new insights into the overthrow of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem in 1963 and demonstrates that the coup negated the South Vietnamese government's tremendous, and hitherto unappreciated, military and political gains between 1954 and 1963. After Diem's assassination, President Lyndon Johnson had at his disposal several aggressive policy options that could have enabled South Vietnam to continue the war without a massive U.S. troop infusion, but he ruled out these options because of faulty assumptions and inadequate intelligence, making such an infusion the only means of saving the country.

Dr. Mark Moyar holds a B.A. summa cum laude in history from Harvard University and a Ph.D. in history from Cambridge University. He is the author of *Phoenix and the Birds of Prey: The CIA's Secret Campaign to Destroy the Viet Cong*. Dr. Moyar has taught at Cambridge University, Ohio State University, and Texas A&M University. At present, he is Associate Professor and Course Director at the U.S. Marine Corps University in Quantico, Virginia.

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Frontmatter

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Triumph Forsaken

THE VIETNAM WAR, 1954–1965

Mark Moyer

U.S. Marine Corps University



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Mark Moyer
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For Kelli, Greta, Trent, Luke, Bert, and Marjorie

Contents

List of Illustrations	<i>page</i> ix
Preface	xi
Acknowledgments	xxv
1 Heritage	1
2 Two Vietnams: July 1954–December 1955	32
3 Peaceful Coexistence: 1956–1959	60
4 Insurgency: 1960	87
5 Commitment: 1961	120
6 Rejuvenation: January–June 1962	148
7 Attack: July–December 1962	165
8 The Battle of Ap Bac: January 1963	186
9 Diem on Trial: February–July 1963	206
10 Betrayal: August 1963	229
11 Self-Destruction: September–November 2, 1963	244
12 The Return of the Twelve Warlords: November 3–December 1963	275
13 Self-Imposed Restrictions: January–July 1964	288
14 Signals: August–October 1964	310
15 Invasion: November–December 1964	330
16 The Prize for Victory: January–May 1965	350
17 Decision: June–July 1965	392
Abbreviations Used in Notes	417
Notes	419
Index	503

List of Illustrations

Map of South East Asia	xxviii
Map of Indochina	xxix
Map of South Vietnam (Communist)	xxx
Map of South Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam)	xxxi
1 Parade float in Hanoi depicting Ho Chi Minh shaking hands with Mao Zedong. The writing at the bottom of the float reads: “Eternal Friendship.”	
2 Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ngo Dinh Diem.	
3 Strategic hamlet.	
4 Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers with U.S. Army helicopters.	
5 David Halberstam.	
6 General Paul Harkins and Major General Ton That Dinh.	
7 A Buddhist demonstration in Saigon.	
8 Henry Cabot Lodge and John F. Kennedy.	
9 Lyndon B. Johnson and Robert S. McNamara.	
10 Ho Chi Minh and Sukarno.	

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This project began as a single-volume general history of the Vietnam War that would, like most histories spanning such a large conflict, rely primarily on existing books and articles for information, creating a long braid, as it were, by weaving together strands and shorter braids crafted by others. Initial research on the early years of the Vietnam War, however, revealed that many of the existing strands were flawed, and that many other necessary strands were missing altogether. Historical accuracy, therefore, demanded the rebuilding of existing strands and the creation of new strands. The history of the war had to be constructed through the use, whenever possible, of primary sources, rather than another's filtration and interpretation of those sources. This construction process, which involved prolonged exploration of the vast diplomatic, military, and political records of the period, dramatically lengthened the time needed to complete the project, and it increased the number of pages needed to provide the necessary evidence. As a consequence, the history has been divided into two volumes, split at July 28, 1965, the date on which President Lyndon B. Johnson publicly announced the first of many huge increases in the number of U.S. troops in Vietnam. This book is the first of the two volumes.

The inadequacy of the existing historical strands has not been a function of low production volumes. In recent years, new historical books on the Vietnam War have been appearing at an impressive pace, adding considerably to what was already a large body of histories. Like the earlier scholarship, however, the recent historical literature has been concentrated in a relatively small number of areas, and it has been dominated by one major school of thought. Most of the new works are concerned primarily with American policymaking in Washington and Saigon. Most of them come from what is known as the orthodox school, which generally sees America's involvement in the war as wrongheaded and unjust. The revisionist school, which sees the war as a noble but improperly executed enterprise, has published much less, primarily because it has few adherents in the academic world.¹

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Within the last decade, orthodox historians have written a substantial number of prominent books on policymaking during the Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson presidencies, as well as several noteworthy histories spanning the entire Vietnam conflict.² In addition, some recent specialized books of orthodox persuasion have made significant contributions to the literature on the period from 1954 to 1965.³ Other specialized works have challenged some interpretations of the orthodox school while still embracing its overarching tenets.⁴ Still other specialized works do not clearly fit into either the orthodox or the revisionist camp, largely because most of the fundamental questions dividing the camps lie beyond their scope. Several such histories have incorporated valuable evidence from Soviet and Chinese archives.⁵ The increased accessibility of Vietnamese and French sources has led to the production of new publications on Vietnamese Communism and Vietnamese anti-Communism, some of them high in quality.⁶ Although most of the recent military histories of the Vietnam War focus on the period from August 1965 onward, when American ground forces were fully engaged in the war, a small number examine military events in the period that ended in July 1965.⁷ David Elliott and Eric Bergerud have produced thorough and informative histories of the conflict in a single province throughout the course of the war.⁸ Recent biographies of American presidents and other high-ranking figures have also brought new discoveries on strategic decision making.⁹ Studies of other countries and regions have illuminated international perspectives on the Vietnam War.¹⁰

The orthodox–revisionist split has yet to become a full-fledged debate, because many orthodox historians have insisted that the fundamental issues of the Vietnam War are not open to debate. As Fredrik Logevall has stated in one of the most widely acclaimed of the recent orthodox histories, most scholars consider it “axiomatic” that the United States was wrong to go to war in Vietnam.¹¹ Some prominent orthodox scholars have gone so far as to claim that revisionists are not historians at all but merely ideologues, a claim that is indicative of a larger, very harmful trend at American universities whereby haughty derision and ostracism are used against those whose work calls into question the reigning ideological orthodoxy, stifling debate and leading to defects and gaps in scholarship of the sort found in the historical literature on the Vietnam War. David L. Anderson, the president of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations and an orthodox historian of the Vietnam War, asserted in his 2005 presidential address that revisionists interpret the war based on an “uncritical acceptance” of American Cold War policy rather than analysis of the facts, in contrast to orthodox historians, who strictly use “reasoned analysis” to reach their conclusions.¹²

Anderson’s assertion about revisionists’ “uncritical acceptance” of America’s overarching policies can be discredited readily by examining my first book on the Vietnam War, a revisionist history that was known to Anderson. In that book, which focused on counterinsurgency during the latter years of the war, I

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xiii

advanced the revisionist arguments that 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. But I also contended that U.S. politicians were wrong to view the preservation of South Vietnam as a vital U.S. interest.¹³ In the course of writing *Triumph Forsaken*, analysis of hitherto unappreciated facts caused me to alter this and other conclusions, an approach diametrically opposed to the ideologically driven approach deplored by Anderson.

During the past ten years, moreover, other revisionist historians have produced some well-researched, well-reasoned works covering the Vietnam conflict between 1954 and 1965, carrying on a relatively small, but strong, tradition of revisionist literature that dates back to the mid-1970s.¹⁴ Drawing on a wide range of new archival sources, Arthur Dommen's history of the two Indochina wars provides a large amount of new information and analysis.¹⁵ *Dereliction of Duty* by H. R. McMaster has shed much new light on U.S. policymaking in 1964 and 1965, particularly with respect to the Joint Chiefs of Staff.¹⁶ Michael Lind has persuasively criticized a variety of orthodox interpretations,¹⁷ and C. Dale Walton has effectively challenged the conventional wisdom on America's strategic options.¹⁸ Several other works have presented new interpretations of the Diem government and the 1963 coup.¹⁹ The strength of the recent revisionist works provides ample evidence that the orthodox school needs to analyze its own interpretations more critically.

There are numerous points of agreement between this volume and the orthodox histories, but there is little agreement on most of the key controversies. This history arrives at some of the same general conclusions as previous revisionist works, as the facts brought it to those points, but differs from them in that it contains many new interpretations and challenges many orthodox interpretations that have hitherto gone unchallenged. It differs from all of the existing literature in its breadth of coverage both inside and outside the two Vietnams and in its use of a more comprehensive collection of source material.

This account first examines the Vietnam War's central characters and countries in the years leading up to 1954. According to the orthodox view, the Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh followed in the tradition of numerous Vietnamese nationalists who had defended the country against foreign aggression and who had despised the Chinese and other foreigners. A careful look into Vietnam's past, however, supports no such contentions. Almost all of the conflicts in Vietnamese history before the twentieth century had involved Vietnamese fighting against Vietnamese, not against external enemies. Neither Ho Chi Minh nor Vietnamese of previous generations hated the Chinese, and in fact they both worked amicably with Chinese allies. Ho Chi Minh would serve in the Chinese Communist Army in World War II, he would do whatever his Chinese Communist allies recommended during his war with France, and he would ask the Chinese to send troops to help him in Vietnam

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978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

on several occasions. Ho generally showed greater deference toward his foreign patrons than did his nationalist rival in South Vietnam, Ngo Dinh Diem, who would ultimately suffer death for refusing to yield to the demands of his American allies. Ho was a fervent believer in the Communism of Marx and Lenin, committed so deeply to Communist internationalism that he would not have sacrificed Communist solidarity for the sake of Vietnam's narrow interests. Thus, contrary to widely accepted interpretations, he never would have turned against his Chinese Communist neighbors, or any other Communist countries, had the United States allowed him to unify Vietnam. Ho Chi Minh would not have let the United States transform his country into an Asian Yugoslavia.

From 1954 to 1965, American leaders correctly perceived that China and North Vietnam were working together to spread Communism across Southeast Asia. They did not view the Communist threat to Vietnam as monolithic in nature, for they were aware of the Sino-Soviet rift that had opened in the 1950s and they knew that the Soviet Union was providing minimal support for Communist expansionism in Southeast Asia. As the war in Vietnam grew in intensity, leading figures in the Johnson administration predicted that the conflict would widen the rift between the Chinese and Soviets, and subsequent history would prove them right.

Whereas the very top leaders of the Vietnamese Communist Party fought the war for ideological reasons, the South Vietnamese peasants who joined the Viet Cong insurgency were attracted primarily by the Viet Cong's leadership capabilities and military strength. They were easily swayed by its charismatic leaders and they wanted to be on the winning side when the fighting ended. Concerned exclusively with local rather than national matters, the peasant masses had little interest in fighting for nationalist causes, and even less interest in Marxist theories or in the collectivization of agriculture that the Communists had in mind. The Viet Cong's temporary land redistribution program did help attract the support of landless peasants, but in the peasants' minds, leadership and strength always outweighed economic policies.

South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem, who has been incessantly depicted as an obtuse, tyrannical reactionary by orthodox historians, was in reality a very wise and effective leader. In 1954 and 1955, with few resources at his disposal, he brought order to a demoralized, disorganized, and divided South Vietnam. A man deeply dedicated to the welfare of his country, Diem governed in an authoritarian way because he considered Western-style democracy inappropriate for a country that was fractious and dominated by an authoritarian culture. The accuracy of this belief would be borne out by the events that followed his assassination. Diem attempted, with some success, to create a modern Vietnam that preserved Vietnamese traditions, an objective that resonated with his countrymen and with other Asian nationalists to a greater degree than did Western liberalism or Communism. Diem did not stifle religion or kill tens

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xv

of thousands in the process of redistributing land as Ho Chi Minh did, and he was more tolerant of dissent than his northern counterpart. Most South Vietnamese citizens and officials had a high opinion of Diem, though some disliked his brother and close adviser Ngo Dinh Nhu.

For most of Diem's tenure, the South Vietnamese government held the upper hand in its struggle against the Vietnamese Communists. In the late 1950s, Diem virtually wiped out the secret Communist networks in South Vietnam, thereby precipitating Hanoi's decision to move from political struggle and limited assassinations to a large-scale Maoist insurgency. During 1960 and 1961, the insurgents succeeded in eliminating or reducing the government's power in some areas, and the Diem government was not very effective in employing countermeasures. The problem was not that Diem and his American advisers were interested only in conventional military power, as some would have it. Diem and America's military representatives in South Vietnam fully understood the importance of both conventional forces and counter-guerrilla forces to the defense of South Vietnam. Much of the responsibility for the travails of 1960 and 1961 belonged to U.S. Ambassador Elbridge Durbrow and other American civilians, who chose to provide the South Vietnamese militia and other counter-guerrilla forces with fewer funds and lighter weaponry than they needed. The other key factor was the ability of the Viet Cong to field better leaders on average than the Diem government, the result of political and cultural differences.

During 1960, Diem's forces did score a major success by severing the first Ho Chi Minh Trail, which was located solely within the territory of North and South Vietnam. The North Vietnamese responded by shifting their logistical lines from South Vietnam into Laos, enabling them to intensify the insurgency and mount a very effective, but ultimately inconclusive, offensive in the fall of 1961. President Kennedy, preferring to fight alongside the South Vietnamese rather than the Laotians because of the former's much greater pugnacity, chose not to intervene in Laos and instead tried to solve his Laotian problems through a neutralization agreement. When the North Vietnamese failed to withdraw their forces in the fall of 1962 as stipulated in the agreement, Kennedy refrained from sending American forces into Laos to stop the continuing infiltration. It was a disastrous concession to the enemy, a concession that would haunt South Vietnam and the United States for the remaining fourteen years of the war. Yet despite the heavy influx of Communist personnel and materiel via Laos, the years 1962 and 1963 saw a dramatic turnaround in the war within South Vietnam. Capitalizing on major increases in U.S. military assistance and the coming of age of young leaders whom Diem had begun developing in the 1950s, the South Vietnamese government implemented the strategic hamlet program with great vigor and strengthened its conventional and militia forces. By permanently infusing large numbers of devoted militiamen and officials into the strategic hamlets and by inflicting numerous defeats on the Viet Cong's

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

armed forces, the government reestablished control over most of the territory where the Viet Cong had made inroads in the preceding two years.

Diem's critics were wrong to believe that the Buddhist protest movement of 1963 arose from popular dissatisfaction with a government guilty of religious intolerance. It was, in truth, a power play by a few Buddhist leaders whose duplicity became clear over time as they showed themselves impervious to government attempts at reconciliation and as their charges of religious persecution were disproved. These leaders had close ties to the Communists or were themselves covert Communists, and other Communist agents participated extensively in the Buddhist movement's protest activities. In Vietnam, where a government lost face if it tolerated sharp public dissent, Diem ultimately had to suppress the Buddhist movement if his government were to remain viable. He suppressed it very effectively on August 21, 1963, by arresting its leaders and clearing the pagodas where it was headquartered. This maneuver was actually the brainchild of Diem's generals, a critical fact lost on those Americans who turned against Diem for his alleged heavy-handedness against the Buddhists. Most remarkably, the anti-Diem Americans would decide that Diem should be replaced with those very generals. While his generals thought that Diem remained the best man for the Presidency, the ensuing renunciations of Diem by the U.S. government and press ultimately caused some of them to remove him from power.

In 1963, the American journalists David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan played pivotal roles in turning influential Americans and South Vietnamese against the Diem regime. Their reporting on military events was inaccurate at times, and it regularly overemphasized the South Vietnamese government's shortcomings. Colonel John Paul Vann, a U.S. Army adviser and the central figure in Sheehan's book *A Bright Shining Lie*, was more dishonest in dealing with the press than Sheehan ever acknowledged. Vann fed the journalists an extremely misleading version of the Battle of Ap Bac, one that the journalists transformed into the accepted version of the battle. Halberstam and Sheehan presented grossly inaccurate information on the Buddhist protest movement and on South Vietnamese politics, much of which they unwittingly received from secret Communist agents. Ignorant of cultural differences between the United States and Vietnam, they criticized the Diem government for refusing to act like an American government when, in fact, Diem's political methods were far more effective than American methods in treating South Vietnam's problems. South Vietnam's elites, who regularly read Vietnamese translations of American press articles, viewed the *New York Times* and other U.S. newspapers as mouthpieces of the U.S. administration, with the result that negative articles on the Diem government undermined South Vietnamese confidence in Diem and encouraged rebellion. Although the American journalists hoped that their reporting would bring about the installation of a better South Vietnamese government, it actually caused enormous damage to South Vietnam and to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xvii

American interests there. Once the coup that they had promoted led to a succession of ineffective governments, exposing them to blame for the crippling of South Vietnam, Halberstam, Sheehan, and fellow journalist Stanley Karnow disparaged Diem with falsehoods so as to claim that South Vietnam was already weak beyond hope before the coup. This turn of events would distort much of the subsequent analysis of the Diem government.

President Kennedy did not consent to the coup that ousted Ngo Dinh Diem on November 1, 1963. Until the very end, Kennedy had serious reservations about the plotting against Diem, in considerable part because many of his senior subordinates opposed Diem's removal, and he unsuccessfully tried to slow the anti-Diem conspiracy. U.S. Ambassador to South Vietnam Henry Cabot Lodge, who was much influenced by Halberstam and Sheehan, instigated the coup without notifying Kennedy and in direct violation of Presidential orders. A few days before the coup began, Kennedy discovered that Lodge was encouraging a group of South Vietnamese generals to rebel and was not informing Washington of his contacts with the conspirators. President Kennedy tried to rein in Lodge and the plotters by sending instructions to the Saigon embassy, but to no avail. He did not take decisive action to stop Lodge, primarily because Lodge was a leading candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination in 1964, and Kennedy did not want campaign accusations that he had kept the Republican ambassador from taking the required actions. Kennedy had appointed Lodge with the intention of hamstringing him and the Republicans by enmeshing them in Vietnam, but it would turn out to be the President who was hamstrung.

Supporting the coup of November 1963 was by far the worst American mistake of the Vietnam War. Contrary to later assertions by the coup's advocates, the South Vietnamese war effort had not entered into a period of decline during the last months of Diem's rule. Proof that the war was proceeding satisfactorily until the coup comes from North Vietnamese as well as American sources – disproving the thesis that American officials were mindlessly optimistic at the time – and also from the 1963 articles of the journalists who would subsequently propagate the myth of a pre-coup collapse. The deterioration did not begin until the period immediately following Diem's overthrow, when the new leaders failed to lead, feuded with each other, and arrested untold numbers of former Diem supporters. Within a few months of the coup, the pacification effort would collapse in most parts of the countryside, and the regular armed forces would be in the first stages of a lengthy period of decline. These changes would help propel Hanoi toward a strategy of seeking a decisive victory through the destruction of South Vietnam's armed forces, which in turn would eventually force the Americans to decide either to introduce U.S. ground troops or to abandon South Vietnam.

Throughout his Presidency, John F. Kennedy was firmly committed to preserving a non-Communist South Vietnam, and he had no plans to abandon his South Vietnamese allies after the 1964 election. Convinced that the defense

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

Preface

of South Vietnam was vital to U.S. security, Kennedy vastly expanded the U.S. aid and advisory programs in South Vietnam over the course of his term. Prior to his assassination, Kennedy took no actions that might suggest an intent to abandon Vietnam to the Communists after reelection, and those who knew him best said afterwards that he had never given serious consideration to such a withdrawal. Had Kennedy faced the crisis in Vietnam that Johnson faced in the middle of 1965, he most likely would have come to the same conclusion as Johnson: that saving South Vietnam was so important as to warrant the use of U.S. combat forces.

The effects of the South Vietnamese government's poor performance from Ngo Dinh Diem's death until the middle of 1965 have been understood widely, but its causes have not. According to one standard explanation, the Saigon government failed because its leaders and its American advisers selected the wrong methods for combating the enemy. In truth, however, the problem was not in the concepts but in the execution. An explanation more commonly advanced, closer to the mark but still only partially correct, is that the South Vietnamese government faltered at this time because the country's ruling elite was bereft of strong leaders. Many individuals who occupied positions of power in the post-Diem period, it is true, did lack the necessary leadership attributes, and none was as talented as Diem, but the caliber of the elites as a whole was not a critical problem. The critical problems, rather, were the exclusion of certain elites from the government and the manipulation of governmental leaders by the militant Buddhist movement. From November 1963 onward, the top leadership in Saigon repeatedly removed men of considerable talent, either because of their past loyalty to Diem or because of pressure from the militant Buddhists. And in spite of these purges, the government still had some men, even at the very top at times, who possessed leadership capabilities that would have made them successful leaders had it not been for militant Buddhist con-
 -niving. The Buddhist leaders tried to bridle every government that held power after Diem, and in most instances they succeeded, largely because government officials feared resisting the Buddhist activists after watching Diem lose American favor, and his life, for resisting them. As its American advocates had desired, the 1963 coup led to political liberalization, but rather than improving the government as those Americans had predicted, liberalization had the opposite effect, enabling enemies of the government to undermine its prestige and authority, as well as to foment discord and violence between religious groups. Not until June 1965, by which time the United States and most South Vietnamese leaders had come to realize the necessity of suppressing the militant Buddhists and other troublemakers, would political stability return. By then, however, South Vietnam had sustained crippling damage and Hanoi was pushing for total victory.

Lyndon Johnson's lack of forcefulness in Vietnam in late 1964 and early 1965 squandered America's deterrent power and led to a decision in Hanoi to

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xix

invade South Vietnam with large North Vietnamese Army units. According to the prevailing historical interpretation, the leadership in Hanoi relentlessly pursued a strategy of attacking in the South until it won, with little regard for what its enemies did. In reality, however, North Vietnam's strategy was heavily dependent on American actions. Although Johnson's generals favored striking North Vietnam quickly and powerfully, he chose to follow the prescriptions of his civilian advisers, who advocated an academic approach that used small doses of force to convey America's resolve without provoking the enemy. Because of his chosen strategic philosophy and because of international and U.S. electoral politics, Johnson made only a token attack on North Vietnam following the Tonkin Gulf incidents of 1964 and undertook no military action thereafter. Rather than inducing the North Vietnamese to reciprocate with self-limitations, as the theorists predicted, however, this approach served only to heighten Hanoi's appetite and courage. Johnson's lack of action, as well as his presidential campaign rhetoric, convinced Hanoi that the Americans would not put up a fight for Vietnam in the near future. This change came at a time when the weakened condition of the Saigon government indicated that South Vietnamese resistance to a North Vietnamese invasion would be weak. Consequently, in November 1964, Hanoi began sending large North Vietnamese Army units to South Vietnam, with the intention of winning the war swiftly. The Americans were slow to identify the shift in North Vietnam's strategy and thus lost any remaining chance of deterring Hanoi or otherwise enabling South Vietnam to survive without U.S. combat troops.

Some well-known historians have argued that President Johnson wanted to inject U.S. ground troops into the war whether they were needed or not. Johnson made his decision to intervene, they contend, at the end of 1964 or in early 1965. In actuality, Johnson reached his decision no earlier than the latter part of June 1965, by which time intervention had become the only means of saving South Vietnam. The first U.S. ground troops sent to Vietnam arrived in March 1965, but Johnson deployed them only to protect U.S. air bases, not to engage the main elements of the Communist forces. At the time of the initial ground force deployments, Johnson and his lieutenants did not foresee a major war between American and Communist forces, because they did not know that Hanoi had begun sending entire North Vietnamese Army regiments into South Vietnam. They did not learn of this development until the beginning of April. By the middle of June, abetted by a continuing infusion of North Vietnamese soldiers, the Communist forces had won many large victories and the South Vietnamese Army was losing its ability to challenge large Communist initiatives. The North Vietnamese had entered the third and final stage of Maoist revolutionary warfare, in which the revolutionaries use massed conventional forces to destroy the government's conventional forces. Hanoi's ultimate success, as its leaders repeatedly stated, depended above all on the ability of its conventional forces to destroy the South Vietnamese Army, particularly its mobile strategic reserve

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyer

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

Preface

units, not South Vietnam's small counter-guerrilla forces. The fighting of 1965 demonstrated that, contrary to the contentions of a multitude of pundits and theoreticians, the Americans and the South Vietnamese had been correct to develop a large conventional South Vietnamese army during the 1950s and early 1960s rather than concentrate exclusively on small-unit warfare.

Lyndon Johnson had always wanted to avoid putting U.S. troops into the ground war if there was any way that South Vietnam could continue the war without them. Like most of his advisers, he doubted that U.S. ground force intervention would result in an easy victory, believing instead that it would result in a long, painful, and politically troublesome struggle against an enemy who might never give up. But in June 1965, Johnson and his military advisers concluded, correctly, that only the use of U.S. ground forces in major combat could stop the Communist conventional forces from finishing off the South Vietnamese Army and government. Even as Johnson became convinced of the need for intervention, he held out hopes of withdrawing U.S. troops from Vietnam relatively soon, regardless of how the fighting was going, in the belief that a brief intervention might achieve as much as a sustained intervention in terms of preserving U.S. credibility and prestige in the world.

Johnson decided that South Vietnam was worth rescuing in 1965 primarily because he dreaded the international consequences of that country's demise. His greatest fear was the so-called domino effect, whereby the fall of Vietnam would cause other countries in Asia to fall to Communism. Historians have frequently argued that Johnson fought for Vietnam primarily to protect himself against accusations from the American Right that he was soft on Communism, which would have harmed his reputation and denied him the political support he needed to carry out his domestic agenda. In actuality, the domestic political ramifications of losing Vietnam had relatively little influence on Johnson's decision on whether to protect South Vietnam. Johnson recognized that the American people were largely apathetic about Vietnam and would be no more likely to turn against him politically and personally if he left than if he stayed and fought. Domestic political considerations did, on the other hand, exert great influence on how Johnson protected South Vietnam, as they discouraged him from bridling Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, from taking a tough stance on Vietnam before the 1964 election, and from calling up the U.S. reserves and otherwise putting the United States on a war footing. That there has been great cynicism and confusion about Johnson's motives was partly the responsibility of the President himself, for during this period he repeatedly misrepresented his intentions to the American people and he did not provide decisive leadership that would have clarified his views and inspired the people's confidence.

The domino theory was valid. The fear of falling dominoes in Asia was based not on simple-mindedness or paranoia, but rather on a sound understanding of the toppler countries and the domino countries. As Lyndon Johnson pondered whether to send U.S. troops into battle, the evidence overwhelmingly supported

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xxi

the conclusion that South Vietnam's defeat would lead to either a Communist takeover or the switching of allegiance to China in most of the region's countries. Information available since that time has reinforced this conclusion. Vietnam itself was not intrinsically vital to U.S. interests, but it was vital nevertheless because its fate strongly influenced events in other Asian countries that were intrinsically vital, most notably Indonesia and Japan. In 1965, China and North Vietnam were aggressively and resolutely trying to topple the dominoes, and the dominoes were very vulnerable to toppling. Throughout Asia, among those who paid attention to international affairs, the domino theory enjoyed a wide following. If the United States pulled out of Vietnam, Asia's leaders generally believed, the Americans would lose their credibility in Asia and most of Asia would have to bow before China or face destruction, with enormous global repercussions. Every country in Southeast Asia and the surrounding area, aside from the few that were already on China's side, advocated U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and most of them offered to assist the South Vietnamese war effort. The oft-maligned analogy to the Munich agreement of 1938 actually offered a sound prediction of how the dominoes would likely fall: Communist gains in one area would encourage the Communists to seek further conquests in other places, and after each Communist victory the aggressors would enjoy greater assets and the defenders fewer.

Further evidence of the domino theory's validity can be found by examining the impact of America's Vietnam policy on other developments in the world between 1965 and the fall of South Vietnam in 1975, developments that would remove the danger of a tumbling of Asian dominoes. Among these were the widening of the Sino-Soviet split, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and the civil war in Cambodia. America's willingness to hold firm in Vietnam did much to foster anti-Communism among the generals of Indonesia, which was the domino of greatest strategic importance in Southeast Asia. Had the Americans abandoned Vietnam in 1965, these generals most likely would not have seized power from the pro-Communist Sukarno and annihilated the Indonesian Communist Party later that year, as they ultimately did. Communism's ultimate failure to knock over the dominoes in Asia was not an inevitable outcome, independent of events in Vietnam, but was instead the result of obstacles that the United States threw in Communism's path by intervening in Vietnam.

It has been said that the Johnson administration, in its first years, could have negotiated a U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam that would have preserved a non-Communist South Vietnam for years to come. Evidence from the Communist side, however, reveals North Vietnam's complete unwillingness to negotiate such a deal. The Communists would not have agreed to a settlement in 1964 or 1965 that could have prevented them from gaining control of South Vietnam quickly. With their list of military victories growing longer and longer, with a clear and promising plan for conquering South Vietnam on the battlefield, the

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Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

North Vietnamese had no reason to accept a diplomatic settlement that might rob them of the spoils.

The Americans did miss some strategic opportunities of a different sort, opportunities that would have allowed them to fight from a much more favorable strategic position. In the chaotic period following Diem's overthrow, the Joint Chiefs of Staff and other U.S. military leaders repeatedly advocated an invasion of North Vietnam. Johnson and his civilian advisers rejected this advice, however, on the grounds that an American invasion of the North could lead to a war between the United States and China. Historians have generally concurred in the assessment that Chinese intervention was likely. But the evidence shows that until at least March 1965, the deployment of U.S. ground forces into North Vietnam would not have prompted the Chinese to intercede. Having suffered huge losses in the Korean War, the Chinese had no more appetite for a war between themselves and the Americans than did their American counterparts. Johnson's failure to attack North Vietnam also worked to the enemy's advantage by facilitating a massive Chinese troop deployment into North Vietnam, which in turn freed up many North Vietnamese Army divisions for deployment to South Vietnam and made a subsequent U.S. invasion of North Vietnam much riskier.

Another opportunity not taken – one that never carried a serious risk of war with China – was the cutting of the Ho Chi Minh Trail with American forces. Johnson rejected many recommendations from the Joint Chiefs to put U.S. ground forces into Laos to carry out this task, and on this point, too, historians have backed the President over his generals. The Johnson administration and some historians have argued that the Ho Chi Minh Trail was not essential to the Communist war effort, but new evidence on the trail and on specific battles makes clear the inaccuracy of this contention. The Viet Cong insurgency was always heavily dependent on North Vietnamese infiltration of men and equipment into South Vietnam through Laos, and it could not have brought the Saigon government close to collapse in 1965, or defeated it in 1975, without heavy infiltration of both. Other orthodox historians have argued that an American ground troop presence in Laos would not have stopped most of the infiltration, but much new evidence contradicts this contention as well. The United States, moreover, missed some valuable opportunities to sever Hanoi's maritime supply lines, although it did cut some of the most important sea routes in early 1965.

In sum, South Vietnam was a vital interest of the United States during the period from 1954 to 1965. The aggressive expansionism of North Vietnam and China threatened South Vietnam's existence, and by 1965 only strong American action could keep South Vietnam out of Communist hands. America's policy of defending South Vietnam was therefore sound. U.S. intervention in Vietnam was not an act of strategic buffoonery, nor was it a sinister, warmongering plot that should forever stand as a terrible blemish on America's soul. Neither was

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Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

xxiii

it an act of hubris in which the United States pursued objectives far beyond its means. Where the United States erred seriously was in formulating its strategies for protecting South Vietnam. The most terrible mistake was the inciting of the November 1963 coup, for Ngo Dinh Diem's overthrow forfeited the tremendous gains of the preceding nine years and plunged the country into an extended period of instability and weakness. The Johnson administration was handed the thorny tasks of handling the post-coup mess and defending South Vietnam against an increasingly ambitious enemy – and in neither case did the administration achieve good results. President Johnson had available several aggressive policy options that could have enabled South Vietnam to continue the war either without the help of any American ground forces at all or with the employment of U.S. ground forces in advantageous positions outside South Vietnam. But Johnson ruled out these options and therefore, during the summer of 1965, he would have to fight a defensive war within South Vietnam's borders in order to avoid the dreadful international consequences of abandoning the country.

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Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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978-0-521-86911-9 - Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965

Mark Moyar

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxvi

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Mark Moyar
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

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Frontmatter
[More information](#)



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