Despite the thousands of books on the subject, Vietnam remains America’s most contentious and least-understood war. The vast majority of the research focuses on the big American war, from the escalation in 1965 through the Tet Offensive in 1968, even though more Americans died following the 1968 Tet Offensive than before. Least studied is the period before the commitment of large numbers of American ground units in the fateful year of 1965. Retired Marine Corps Colonel Michael M. Walker has stepped into that gap with America and Vietnam, 1954–1963: The Road to War. Walker is Special Projects Docent at the state-sponsored Idaho Military History Museum in Boise and author of The 1929 Sino-Soviet War: The War Nobody Knew, which was published by Kansas University Press in 2017 and won the New York Military Affairs Symposium Arthur Goodzeit Award.

Walker’s new book would have benefitted from a closer editorial eye; there are typographical errors throughout. Small but disconcerting mistakes mar the nearly 400 pages of this book based on research done from Idaho. As Walker acknowledges, “technology has revolutionized the process by allowing researchers to dig into primary and secondary sources from anywhere at any time” (vi). Even if America and Vietnam is not based upon in-person archival work and it does not include Vietnamese-language sources, Walker has done his homework. The book focuses on telling the origins of what Vietnamese call “the American War” from the perspective of Hanoi (North Vietnam or the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV)) and Saigon (South Vietnam or the Republic of Vietnam (RVN)) and is divided into four parts. The first deals with the rise of RVN President Ngo Dinh Diem and tries to answer the question of how someone perceived to be a “deeply flawed and inept leader” managed to “take a failing state on the brink of collapse in 1954 and build South Vietnam into a functioning and progressive nation by 1959” (2).

While most historians of the war are less sanguine about how well South Vietnam was functioning in 1959, Walker does have a great deal to say about how the aftermath of the French Indochinese War (1946–1954) shaped the American war to come. He paints a more complicated and complimentary picture of Diem than

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4 The preface, for example, contains these errors: “to try answer question” (4) and “it was resounding victory” (5) on successive pages.
do many historians.\(^6\) Walker oddly claims that that “no biography of Ngo Dinh Diem exists” (3) while at the same time citing several capable book-length biographies of Diem including Geoffrey Shaw’s *Last Mandate of Heaven*, Jessica Chapman’s *Cauldron of Resistance*, and Geoffrey Stewart’s *Vietnam’s Lost Revolution.\(^7\)*

Part II analyzes the South Vietnamese military that was left behind by the French and compares it with the North Vietnamese People’s Army of Vietnam (PAVN) and its guerilla arm the National Liberation Front (NLF) or Viet Cong (VC). Walker, who commanded the 3rd Civil Affairs Group in Iraq and served as an intelligence officer with Marine Forces Pacific G-2, Joint Chiefs of Staff J-2 and the Defense Intelligence Agency, is on firm ground here. He is well qualified to assess the training, equipping, and morale of competing armed forces, and accurately describes American interest in building an Army of the Republic of South Vietnam, or ARVN, that was capable of defending the De-Militarized Zone against a cross-border invasion by the PAVN à la the North Korean invasion of the South in 1950; indeed, America planned for the ARVN to defend enclaves around port cities while waiting for American reinforcements to arrive in an echo of the Pusan Perimeter and Inchon Landing of its previous war in Asia.\(^8\)

Walker’s narrative is less critical of this failure of American imagination than is warranted by the evidence. The People’s Army of Vietnam and the Viet Cong that defeated France in a guerrilla warfare campaign in fact presented a very different challenge than the one that the American Military Assistance Advisory Group (MAAG) was preparing to confront. Author and former Army officer Andrew Krepinevich, among others, has highlighted the overriding belief among the American officers who led the MAAG that “any good soldier can beat guerrillas.”\(^9\) The US Army’s failure to appreciate the impact of Mao’s theory of guerrilla warfare may have been the second critical American error in Vietnam, with the first being the choice not to support DRV President Ho Chi Minh, who cited the United States Declaration of Independence when he declared that Vietnam was independent of French rule in 1945. US leaders, who were more concerned about keeping France on side in Europe against a threatening Soviet Union than who ruled Indochina, attempted to stem the tide of nationalism that was eating away at the legacy of French conquest and occupation of Vietnam. This, many have argued, is the decisive American mistake in Vietnam.\(^10\)

Walker places the blame elsewhere. The shortest section of the book is Part III, “What About Laos?” In these 56 pages, Walker argues that “the failure to effectively neutralize Laos was Washington’s first strategic blunder of the Vietnam War” (5). While he is certainly correct that the “Ho Chi Minh Trail” through Laos provided critical logistical support for North Vietnamese forces in both the French and American wars, it is less clear that the United States could have closed down that supply line. America certainly tried, dropping over two million tons of bombs on Laos and even conducting a ground invasion in Operation Lam Son 719, with limited effect on the logistical capabilities of the PAVN and Viet Cong but causing horrific suffering among the people of Laos. The Ho Chi Minh trail was operationally important, but the desire of the North Vietnamese people to defeat what they saw as colonial oppression was decisive. Walker’s narrative could have made more of the differential comparative will north and south of the 17th parallel.

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In his last section, Walker returns to Diem and the 1963 Buddhist crisis that—along with American support for the coup that ousted him—led to his demise. Walker shares the majority opinion that, for all of Diem’s flaws, his assassination was a disaster for South Vietnam; it was, he insists, “Washington’s second strategic blunder” (7).\(^{11}\) He is certainly correct that the aftermath of Diem’s death did not improve the capability of the ARVN or of the Government of South Vietnam to resist a North that rightly saw Diem’s demise as a sign of southern weakness and disarray.

Walker puts a great deal of blame for the coup on the US State Department, noting of the team of Vietnam hands in Foggy Bottom led by Undersecretary of State W. Averell Harriman and Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs Roger Hilsman that “It was [sic] tight group” (287). The chapter title in which it appears, “How About a Coup?” minimizes the gravity of the decision made by a number of mid-level State Department officials without the approval of President John F. Kennedy to indicate to the Government of Vietnam that a change at the top would be welcomed. Three weeks later, Kennedy was also assassinated, removing the most prominent advocate of a counterinsurgency strategy for Vietnam. President Lyndon Johnson did not share Kennedy’s interest in combining political, economic, and informational warfare along with military force; the general he chose to oversee a vast conventional American escalation of the war there, William Westmoreland, stated that the answer to insurgency was “Firepower. Next question.”\(^{12}\)

The American failure in Vietnam was overdetermined. It started with the US backing the wrong side, and was accelerated by a failure to imagine that a guerrilla force could defeat the greatest power on earth. The Ho Chi Minh trail and the assassination of Diem were not high points of the American effort, but ultimately this is a story of a North Vietnamese people and leadership who were determined to oust any form of external control. Despite the book’s limitations, this is a tale that Walker ably tells.


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