In this article, Nathaniel Moir surveys the fascinating career of the United Press International and Newsweek journalist François Sully. Its approach is similar to that of Moir’s recent study of Bernard Fall, Number One Realist (2021). As in that book, Moir’s article highlights the writings and historical impact of an influential French reporter during the Vietnam War. Sully immersed himself in Vietnamese society, spending over twenty years in the country from 1947 until his tragic death resulting from injuries he sustained in a helicopter crash near the Cambodian border in 1971. The pinnacle of his career came in the early 1960s, when he wrote a series of articles criticizing the government of President Ngô Đình Diệm (r. 1954–1963). Moir argues that Sully’s tough reporting on President Diệm played a sizable role in the chain of events that led to the South Vietnamese leader’s assassination in November 1963.

After serving in the French Resistance during World War II, Sully joined his country’s Expeditionary Force that was tasked with reoccupying Vietnam. Soon after arriving in the country, however, Sully became disillusioned with the war, concluding that the French attempt to reconquer Indochina was “impossible” (280). At this time, he became increasingly interested in Vietnamese culture. In 1947, Sully was discharged from the army. He then briefly worked in agricultural farming in Vietnam and began studying the Vietnamese language. After his brief foray into farming, he became a reporter for the French newspaper Sud Asiatique. In other words, Sully became a specialist in Vietnamese affairs. This knowledge and experience during the Indochina War served as the bedrock for Sully’s influential career during the 1960s and 1970s.

The bulk of Moir’s article is based on a careful reading of Sully’s articles, which were written during the eight-year period of Diệm’s presidency (1955–1963). According to Moir, Sully often expressed the big idea that Diệm was taking an “over-militarized approach to addressing South Vietnam’s political problems” (284). Sully struck a similar note in another article that included parts of interviews that he had conducted with his friend and colleague, Bernard Fall, and with an anonymous general from the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Both men criticized the lack of a political solution to the struggle against the National...
Liberation Front (NLF) (284). In a third vignette, Sully argued that the NLF had “more drive and enthusiasm” than the female militia championed by Trân Lê Xuân, the wife of Ngô Đình Nhu and the sister-in-law of President Diệm. Later, Sully and Fall called for “a negotiated settlement with the Democratic Republic of Vietnam” (DRVN, 285). The two journalists argued that Vietnam’s Communist Party leaders would have been willing to enter into some sort of real power-sharing arrangement with their adversaries in Sài Gòn. These criticisms did not sit well with leaders in the Presidential Palace. In short, Sully was a thorn in the side of Diệm’s government.

Moir argues that Sully’s reporting contributed to the poor relationship between the Western press corps and the Diệm regime. Sully’s contentious relationship with Diệm was emblematic of the difficult relationship that developed between the Western press and the South Vietnamese government throughout the war. According to Moir, the RVN leadership saw Sully and the Western press as having been “complicit” in the failed November 1960 coup attempt against Diệm (293). Afterward, the Diệm regime’s relationship with the Western press corps in Sài Gòn increasingly deteriorated. Sully did not help the situation when, in a 1961 article, he praised the combat effectiveness of the ARVN battalion that had been involved in the plot to overthrow Diệm just a few months earlier. Shortly thereafter, the RVN leaders expelled Sully from the country. A number of other journalists who were critical of the regime suffered a similar fate, including American reporters Jim Robinson and Homer Bigart, the Australian reporter Denis Warner, and the aforementioned French reporter Bernard Fall. Many of them were either denied entry visas or expelled from the country. Moir shows how Sully’s reporting was part of a broader clarion call of criticism against the Diệm government that ultimately culminated in the successful American-backed coup d’état on 1 November 1963.

After being expelled from the RVN, Sully reported from Cambodia. Though able to return to Vietnam after Diệm’s ouster, Sully decided to remain based in Phnom Penh. Sully traveled many times to the frontlines in the border region between Cambodia and South Vietnam. There, under extremely dangerous conditions, he reported on the fighting. This embattled area was critical to the logistical chain known as the Hồ Chí Minh Trail, which brought troops and materiel from North Vietnam to Communist forces in the South. Sully’s luck finally ran out in 1971 when he was covering Operation Lam Sơn 719, an unsuccessful ARVN campaign into southern Laos aimed at cutting off the Trail. He was killed when the helicopter carrying him to the frontlines crashed. Like his friend Bernard Fall, who was killed by a landmine, Sully died reporting on the war.

Moir argues that those scholars who overlook Sully’s career “risk revisionist bias and [support the] unfounded categorization of Sully as a contributor to orthodox interpretations of warfare in Southeast Asia” (279). The orthodox school on the American war in Vietnam largely developed amongst critics of the
war, while the revisionist camp tended to be more sympathetic to the RVN political project. Instead, Moir argues that Sully analyzed Vietnamese politics through “a humanitarian critique of the war” rather than through an ideological or political lens (305). It is unclear why Sully should not be categorized into the orthodox camp. Many journalists who had antiwar views—what later became known as the orthodox school—shared Sully’s concern for the impact of the war on innocent bystanders. In fact, the desire to end human suffering and the conflict in Vietnam was one of the primary motivations for criticisms directed at the RVN by orthodox scholars and reporters. Moir offers a positive appraisal of Sully, portraying him, like Fall, as a courageous truth-teller who simply reported on the facts rather than being driven by any particular political agenda.

One of the most frequent objections that scholars level against the orthodox framework is that it was crafted by journalists who were unfamiliar with Vietnamese politics and unable to speak the language. Moir takes issue with this critique. “Scholars should avoid narrow-minded or dogmatic convictions that white male western reporters could not understand Vietnamese society fully enough to critique problems in Vietnam in the 1950s and the 1960s,” he argues (279). Certainly, Sully’s ethnicity and gender did not prevent him from integrating himself into Vietnamese society. Sully spent an enormous amount of time in Vietnam, much more than other Western reporters of his generation.

Nevertheless, Sully’s reporting during the First Republic period conveyed all the hallmarks of an orthodox view of Vietnamese history. First, he depicted the Diệm government as repressive and parochial (284). Second, Sully’s reporting portrayed the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) as inept. In one report, Sully noted that “many Vietnamese soldiers could not read a map or compass” (287). Third, Sully argued that the National Liberation Front (NLF) had “more drive and enthusiasm” (284), and he also admired North Vietnamese leader Tô Hruise (305). Fourth, Sully’s belief that neutralization was a viable option, part of the “lost chance for peace” trope, remains a pillar of the orthodox school (285). Simply put, Sully’s views fit quite neatly into the orthodox or antiwar camp. The argument that Sully was not part of the orthodox school is thus unconvincing.

Moir’s account is full of admiration for Sully and his writings; at times it borders on hagiography and could have benefitted from a more critical stance. For instance, Moir ends the article with the poem “Since” from Tô Hruise, which describes the suffering caused by war, and which resonated with Sully’s experience in “war-

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torn Europe and his subsequent life in Vietnam” (281). Sully regarded Tố Như as “one of the intellectual luminaries of the Hanoi regime and one of Vietnam’s leading contemporary poets” (305). Moir briefly mentions that Tố Như was the “Communist Party’s Propaganda Chief” (306). Further discussion would have offered a more nuanced picture of him.

A member of the Vietnamese Worker’s Party’s (VWP) ten-member Politburo, Tố Như was one of the leading Communist officials during the famous Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm affair in North Vietnam. In this counterrevolutionary campaign, Communist security services arrested and cracked down on artists and intellectuals in the DRV. The affair started when the VWP shut down two leading newspapers in North Vietnam, Nhân Văn (Humanities) and Giai Phẩm (Master Works). There is something ironic and contradictory about Sully’s admiration for Tố Như when Sully was a vocal critic of press censorship in the RVN. Sully, like everybody else at that time, could not freely travel to the DRVN and report about the events in North Vietnam. On the surface, it seems that Sully, like so many other critics of the Sài Gòn government, did not apply the same level of scrutiny to the regime north of the seventeenth parallel as he did to the South Vietnamese government.5

Moir argues that the lack of historical research on Sully stems from the “Vietnamese turn” in scholarship on the war. “Vietnamese studies and Vietnam War scholars have underestimated or overlooked his journalism due to the ‘Vietnamese turn,’” he argues (274). This is an overstatement. Tens of thousands of books have published on the Vietnam War, and only a small percentage of that scholarship is based on Vietnamese archival research associated with the Vietnamese turn. Since the beginning of the Vietnamese turn in early 2000s, the vast majority of Vietnam War scholarship continues to be produced by historians who work in the American archives. While Moir convincingly argues that Sully’s career has been overlooked, the reasons for this lie well beyond the recent “Vietnamese turn.”

One result of the “Vietnamese turn” is that a significant portion of recent scholarship that is based upon research in the Vietnamese archives has challenged and overturned the older orthodox conceptual framework of Vietnamese politics originally crafted by journalists like Sully, Neil Sheehan, Francis Fitzgerald, and others. Scholars like Edward Miller, Nu-Anh Tran, Philip Catton, and Duy Lap Nguyen have radically altered our perception of the Diệm government from the one that was crafted by the Sài Gòn press corps.6 Still, it is clear that Sully’s passion for Vietnamese society and his dedication to learning the language were admirable and helped Sully become a better journalist. One can only lament the journalist

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treasures that he (and other similarly talented reporters with Vietnamese language skills) might have left us had he been able to live in and freely examine life in North Vietnam.

Moir rightfully argues that historians should not lose sight of Western actors, including influential reporters like Bernard Fall or François Sully. These reporters not only shaped the initial understanding of the wars in Vietnam, but they also sometimes became influential historical figures in their own right. In order to survey Sully’s career, Moir consulted historical collections in the United States, notably Sully’s personal papers, which are held at the University of Massachusetts, and the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library. He also draws from a wide variety of newspapers from that era. Through this research, Moir has provided a useful reintroduction of Sully’s writing to a younger generation who might not be familiar with this charismatic reporter. There is much material of interest in this article for historians of the Kennedy administration or Vietnam’s First Republic. Moir’s survey of Sully’s life and writings adds to our historical understanding of the media and of the impact of Western reporters on the Vietnam Wars.

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