Triumph Forsaken Roundtable Review
Review by James McAllister

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Review by James McAllister, Williams College

Historical scholarship on the Vietnam War, as opposed to the war itself, has largely been a peaceful and cooperative enterprise. The predominant puzzle for virtually all historians of the war has been to figure out how American policymakers from Franklin Roosevelt to Lyndon Johnson became involved in a senseless conflict that could and should have been avoided. Within that basic framework, of course, historians have argued endlessly about the role of various individuals, bureaucracies, and potential missed opportunities for an earlier American withdrawal or a negotiated settlement to the war. More recently, some historians have published important books and articles that are far more sensitive to the role of international actors, cultural forces, and Vietnamese perspectives on the war. Nevertheless, the basic paradigm for historians has scarcely changed over the course of the last three decades. Unlike historical scholarship on the origins and course of the Cold War, where you could easily find historians on opposing sides of the fundamental questions of the conflict from the 1960s to the present, scholarship on the Vietnam War has always been marked by a great deal of consensus.

Mark Moyar’s goal in his bold and ambitious book is nothing less than to shatter this enduring consensus about the Vietnam War. In an analogy sure to displease both the author and his critics, the purpose of Triumph Forsaken is to spark a revolution in the area of Vietnam War scholarship equivalent to the one sparked by William Appleman Williams in The Tragedy of American Diplomacy. Moyar’s revisionism is certainly not as sophisticated as that of a Williams, or A.J.P. Taylor on the origins of the Second World War, but his ambition is the same. Many historians will be tempted to lump Moyar’s book in with previous revisionists books by Guenter Lewy, Lewis Sorley, Norman Podhoretz, Harry Summers, Michael Lind, General Westmoreland, and William Colby. This temptation should be resisted, however, because none of the figures previously associated with revisionism ever produced a work of diplomatic and military history as comprehensive and wide ranging as Triumph Forsaken. While many historians can and undoubtedly will vehemently disagree with all or most of the arguments Moyar advances, it is important to recognize that this is an original work of scholarship that can rightfully claim to be the most consequential revisionist book ever produced on the Vietnam War.

Indeed, while historians will undoubtedly focus their attention on Moyar’s disagreements with so called “orthodox” accounts of the Vietnam War, his disagreements with previous revisionists are no less fundamental. It is instructive to compare the central arguments of

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Triumph Forsaken with the main conclusions of Guenter Lewy’s book America in Vietnam (1978) and Michael Lind’s Vietnam The Necessary War (1999). Both Lind and Lewy are highly critical of the military strategy pursued by General William Westmoreland and strong advocates of the so called pacification/counterinsurgency approach to the conflict. In Lewy’s view, the United States “never really learned to fight a counterinsurgency war and used force in largely traditional ways, and the South Vietnamese copied our mistakes (p.438).” Lewy also rejects the idea that the war could have been won by changing the location of the battlefield: “Military action in Laos and Cambodia at an early stage of the war, seeking permanently to block the Ho Chi Minh trail, would have made the North Vietnamese supply effort more difficult, but basically an expansion of the conflict would not have achieved the American task. Certainly, an invasion of North Vietnam would only have magnified the difficulties faced (p.438).”

It is precisely this perspective on the military aspects of the Vietnam War that Moyar rejects throughout Triumph Forsaken. In contrast to both revisionist and orthodox scholars alike, Moyar enthusiastically endorses the general military strategy and tactics advocated by Lt. General “Hanging Sam” Williams, Paul Harkins, and General Westmoreland from the late 1950’s to the summer of 1965. In his view, and in marked contrast to the historical consensus, Williams was correct in organizing the South Vietnamese army primarily on the model of the United States during the 1950s and in emphasizing the primary need for the South Vietnamese to stop a conventional invasion rather than developing the ability to deal with counterinsurgency warfare (pp.67-71). Whether the target is scholars like Andrew Krepinivich or practitioners like John Paul Vann, Triumph Forsaken consistently argues against the idea that the Vietnam War could or should have been fought largely according to the principles of counterinsurgency warfare or that “winning hearts and minds” was a truly important or relevant objective for either side. Advocates of a counterinsurgency strategy are generally viewed by Moyar as people who are ignorant of the realities of the war in general, or the realities of the Vietnam War in particular. Unlike Lewy and countless other historians, Moyar rejects the idea that the possibility of direct Chinese intervention, which he thinks was highly unlikely before March 1965, constituted a sufficient reason to refrain from either cutting off the Ho Chi Minh trail or even invading North Vietnam. In his view, both of these options would have been better ones for Lyndon Johnson than “fighting a defensive war within South Vietnam’s borders in order to avoid the dreadful international consequences of abandoning the country (xxiii).”

Unlike Colonel Harry Summers Jr., who long ago suggested in his book On Strategy that Johnson might have been able to invade North Vietnam without provoking Chinese

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1 Page references are to Guenter Lewy, America in Vietnam (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978). It should be noted that Lewy himself has recently praised Moyar’s book as an excellent contribution to the literature on the war. See Guenter Lewy, “The War That Could Have Been Won,” The New York Sun, 24 November 2006. Nevertheless, the differences between America in Vietnam and Triumph Forsaken on many crucial issues could not be greater. It is also worth noting the contrasting perspectives on American military strategy found in Triumph Forsaken and Lewis Sorley’s A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America’s Last Years in Vietnam (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 1-16.
intervention, Moyar is making his argument primarily as a historian rather than as a military strategist. Does he in fact make a compelling and persuasive case to support the idea that China would not have intervened in the event of an American invasion of North Vietnam before March 1965? Unfortunately, the answer is no and his whole treatment of the issue raises some real questions about Moyar’s tendency to base very important arguments on weak or ambiguous evidence. Over the last ten years scholars such as Chen Jian, Qiang Zhai, James Hershberg, and Xiaoming Zhang among others have produced an impressive body of scholarship on the question of what China might have done in the event of an American invasion of North Vietnam. Moyar himself cites these authors in his footnotes, as well as some of the documentation that has been published by the Cold War International History Project. But all of these authors, all of whom have far more expertise and experience with documents from the Chinese side, would not come anywhere close to endorsing his emphatic argument that China would not have intervened in the event of an American invasion of North Vietnam. While no scholar can ever be certain what Mao would have done in the event of an American invasion, both Quang Zhai and Xiaoming Zhang have explicitly considered and rejected the Summers/Moyar thesis that threats of Chinese intervention were simply a bluff. In Mao’s China and the Cold War, Chen Jian shows that Mao and other Chinese leaders repeatedly indicated between 1962 and August 1964 that an American invasion of North Vietnam would be met by Chinese ground forces. “If the United States attacks the North,” Mao argued in August 1964, “they will have to remember that the Chinese also have legs, and legs are used for walking.”

If the Chinese were clear about their determination to respond up to August 1964, and Moyar essentially agrees with the argument that China’s commitment to intervene in the event of an invasion of North Vietnam was solidified by March 1965, the evidence for his case has to fall within this six-month period. The only truly compelling piece of evidence that Moyar presents from this period to support his argument is a conversation between Mao and Pham Van Dong from October 1964 in which Mao seems to suggest that North Vietnam should be prepared to fight a long guerrilla struggle on their own in the event of an American invasion. This conversation is certainly interesting and invites legitimate speculation as to its larger meaning, although the very same document also makes clear that Mao did not believe that the Johnson administration had either the intention or the capabilities to invade North Vietnam anytime in the immediate future. I do not think that Moyar is being at all intellectually dishonest in making his argument about the possible consequences of an American invasion of North Vietnam, but I do believe that this example shows that he sometimes tends to hang very important and substantial arguments on an

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3 Jian, p.213.
inadequate and very slim body of evidence. Even more frustrating is the fact that in the end it is not at all clear where Moyar himself stands on the entire question of whether the Johnson administration should have invaded North Vietnam in late 1964. After stating the case for an invasion of North Vietnam in very positive terms, Moyar concludes his discussion by acknowledging that “President Johnson had sound reasons for refusing to invade North Vietnam prior to March 1965, the month in which China returned to expressing a willingness to fight in North Vietnam (p.322).” If Moyar’s argument is that Johnson was ultimately right to reject the idea of an invasion of North Vietnam, then his position is essentially no different than that held by most historians today and the one held by American analysts at the time.

It would certainly be a mistake to suggest that *Triumph Forsaken* is exclusively concerned with issues of military strategy. Military issues are a very important part of the book and some of the most compelling passages in the book provide vivid and graphic depictions of the fighting on the ground between the South Vietnamese Army and the communist insurgency. But Moyar’s central argument is that America could have easily avoided the massive military commitment it later wound up making by not overthrowing President Ngo Dinh Diem in November 1963. In his view, the overthrow of Diem was “by far the worst American mistake of the Vietnam War (xvii).” Moyar is far from the first scholar to make positive arguments about Ngo Dinh Diem, or to suggest that the overthrow of Diem in November 1963 was a tragic error, but one will not find a more elaborate and passionate defense of the Diem regime in all of the existing scholarship on the Vietnam War. In his view, Diem was a wise and effective leader who understood the nature of Vietnamese political culture in a way that his many American critics did not and that his decisions and methods of governance were appropriate given this context. If American policymakers had refrained from trying to impose Western standards and mistaken concepts on Diem, Moyar firmly believes that South Vietnam ultimately would have been able to win its struggle against the North largely on its own. In his view, the Buddhist crisis of 1963 provided an opening for Diem’s State Department opponents and journalists such as David Halberstam and Neil Sheehan to make the case for removing Diem from power. If America had simply ignored the mischievous and unfounded protests of the Buddhists, reined in Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge, and concentrated their attention on the military successes and the tremendous progress of the strategic hamlet program in 1963, Moyar suggests that the South Vietnamese might have been able to prevail without the introduction of any American ground forces.

Assessing all of the various strands that compose Moyar’s argument about the Diem regime and his assessment of the war’s status in 1962-63 is beyond the scope of this review. I strongly suspect that even scholars who are generally sympathetic to the idea of Diem revisionism will argue that he goes too far in his defense of various aspects of the Diem regime. Historians of the Vietnam War certainly do not have to accept Moyar’s argument that Diem was a better leader and a more independent nationalist than Ho Chi Minh, but *Triumph Forsaken* does suggest that historians would be better served viewing Diem more as an independent actor with his own goals and less as a simple American puppet.
Moya
does advance an interesting and unique interpretation of South Vietnamesе politics
after the fall of Diem. Most historians suggest that the chronic instability and dismal
performance of the South Vietnamese government after November 1963 was more or less
inevitable. Some scholars emphasize that the generals inherited a situation in the
countryside that was badly deteriorating long before Diem was overthrown, while other
scholars would agree with William Bundy that the quality of the post-Diem leadership was
“the bottom of the barrel, absolutely the bottom of the barrel.” However, Moyar rejects
both of these interpretations of the post-Diem era. Drawing on a wide variety of sources,
Moyar vigorously argues that the deterioration of the security situation in South Vietnam
did not begin until after Diem’s overthrow. In addition, while Moyar certainly does believe
that Diem was a far better leader than all of those who followed him, he rejects the
contention that the quality of leadership was so inherently poor that South Vietnam was
destined to fall into a combination of anarchy and ineffectiveness. In his view, at the very
least, both Nguyen Khanh and Nguyen Van Thieu were capable anti-communist leaders.
The key question that Moyar seeks to answer is why the South Vietnamese government
performed so poorly after November 1963 despite the fact that the elements of effective
leadership were still present even after the overthrow of Diem.

Moyar’s answer is that the militant Buddhists, primarily inspired by the leadership of Thich
Tri Quang, made it nearly impossible for the South Vietnamese government to function.
Any account of the post-Diem era is bound to emphasize the important role played by the
Buddhists, but Moyar is the first historian to suggest that the American journalist
Marguerite Higgins was correct in arguing that Tri Quang was a communist agent. While
Moyar briefly concedes that Tri Quang might not have been controlled by Hanoi, he writes
that the “sum of the evidence strongly suggests that Tri Quang was a communist operative
(218).” Unfortunately, the argument and the evidence presented about Tri Quang’s
communist affiliation in Triumph Forsaken is ultimately no more compelling than the
evidence put forward by Higgins in her book Our Vietnamese Nightmare (1965). Analysts
from the CIA and the Saigon Embassy thoroughly examined the question of Tri Quang and
his alleged communist connections on three occasions between August 1964 and January
1965 and each time they concluded that the evidence simply did not support such
conclusions. As the CIA concluded in August 1964, “The ‘reports’ claiming that he is a
communist fall into the categories of hearsay, gossip, and accusations without any
supporting evidence.”4 Even after the events of December and January 1965, when
American officials were in complete despair over the seeming ability of Tri Quang and the
Buddhists to throw the Saigon government into complete chaos, all of the leading American
analysts of the Buddhist movement still concluded that there was little reason to accept the
thesis of communist control or inspiration.

4 See CIA, “An Analysis of Thich Tri Quang’s Possible Communist Affiliations, Personality and Goals,” LBJ
Library, NSF, VNCF, box 7, vol.16. For a more extensive analysis of Thich Tri Quang’s views and his
relationships with American officials in this period, see James McAllister, “Only Religions Count in Vietnam:
Moyar’s new evidence on Tri Quang amounts to little more than some documents that suggest Hanoi tried and was sometimes successful in infiltrating Buddhist organizations; efforts that were well known to all at the time and in no way an indication of communist influence or agency at the top leadership level. Tri Quang was a demagogue and cared little about democracy, but he was also very anti-communist and privately supportive of aggressive American military actions against the North, much like the ones Moyar favors in *Triumph Forsaken*. The communists, both during and after the war, certainly saw him as an irreconcilable enemy rather than as a partner. As one captured VC document from late 1966 stated, "It is necessary to make our cadre, monks, nuns, and believers realize that Thich Tri Quang is nothing but a deck of cards played by the US imperialists’ political organizations." In short, the “sum of the evidence” strongly suggests that Tri Quang was not a communist operative. As in the case of a hypothetical American invasion of North Vietnam, Moyar first puts his energies and passion into making a very controversial argument, but in the end he also acknowledges that it is quite possible that Tri Quang may have had his own independent reasons for the course of action he pursued.

Historians of the Vietnam War are unlikely to welcome Moyar’s revisionism with any great enthusiasm. Judging by the early reaction to the book, *Triumph Forsaken* is likely to be highly praised by conservatives and rudely dismissed by academic historians. Both sides will attribute the disagreement to the fact that the other side is too influenced by ideology. Personally, I wish that Moyar had written a book on Vietnam that could transcend the revisionist-orthodox divide in the way that Melvyn Leffler’s *A Preponderance of Power* defused similar controversies over the origins and course of the early Cold War. Nevertheless, mainstream diplomatic historians should not dismiss this book as merely an ideologically driven justification for America’s Vietnam policy. If Moyar was only attempting to appeal to a conservative constituency that already accepts his basic view of the war, he would not have immersed himself in all of the secondary literature on the war, conducted serious archival research, read numerous unpublished dissertations, or tried to integrate various communist sources on the war. While the author could and should have left out some sweeping dismissals of the work of some honest and able historians from the footnotes, *Triumph Forsaken* is a work of scholarship that should be taken seriously. For all of my own disagreements with many different aspects of *Triumph Forsaken*, including several not brought up in this review, historians should engage this work like they would any other book on Vietnam. Diplomatic historians should readily accept the challenge to defend a fundamental consensus over the war that has so far stood the test of time.

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