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BOOKSHELF

It Was Only Just Beginning

After nearly a decade of fighting, the French retreated from Vietnam—and America waded in

By **RUFUS PHILLIPS**
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On May 7, 1954, a garrison of French soldiers at Dien Bien Phu, in northwest Vietnam, was captured by Ho Chi Minh's Vietminh forces after a two-month siege. The disastrous French defeat—the first time an Asian army had defeated a European colonial power in fixed battle—came nine years almost to the day from the triumph of V-E Day. (A Vietminh radio operator even taunted the besieged French on the penultimate day of battle by broadcasting an anthem from the French Resistance.) Both the Indochina War and France's on-and-off control of Vietnam, which dated from the 1880s, were all but at an end. But Western involvement in the country, with the United States soon in the lead, would continue for an additional 21 years.

Fredrik Logevall's "Embers of War: The Fall of an Empire and the Making of America's Vietnam," at 714 pages of text, is a monumental history of the 2½ decades leading up to America's direct troop intervention in 1965. Among other aspects, he covers in significant detail France's attempted return as colonial master at the end of World War II, the Indochina War, the 1954 Geneva Accords that divided Vietnam and the subsequent rise of the South as an independent state. This book is a widely researched and eloquently written account of how the U.S. came to be involved in Vietnam and is certainly the most comprehensive review of this period to date.

EMBERS OF WAR

By Fredrik Logevall
Random House, 839 pages, $40

Mr. Logevall's earlier book, "Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of the War in Vietnam" (2001), attempted to prove that there was a viable chance for the U.S. to get out of Vietnam near the end of President Kennedy's administration and the beginning of President Johnson's. His new book again pursues this tenuous theme, suggesting three occasions on which the U.S. could have avoided direct

Vietnamese soldiers allied with the French in northern Vietnam between Namdinh and Thaibinh, during the last weeks of the French Indochina War, 1954. *ROBERT CAPA/MAGNUM PHOTOS*

involvement in Vietnam with few, if any, consequences. We could have supported Ho Chi Minh at the end of World War II, Mr. Logevall argues, facilitating Vietnam's independence but also creating a communist state in Southeast Asia. We could have refused French requests in 1948 for military aid against Ho Chi Minh, although at the risk of losing French support for confronting the Soviet challenge in Europe. Or we could have withdrawn in 1955, pulling the rug out from under Ngo Dinh Diem, the South Vietnamese leader whom we had supported.

Mr. Logevall begins with Ho Chi Minh and the fascinating story of his rise to prominence. During the Paris Peace Conference, in 1919, he was in Paris, making his living as a freelance journalist. Inspired by Woodrow Wilson's 14 Points, Ho attempted in vain to petition the president with an outline called "The Demands of the Vietnamese People." By early 1921, he had been recruited in France into the Communist Party. He left for Moscow in 1923, where he enlisted in the Comintern (devoted to supporting the international communist movement) and was trained at the "Stalin School" in revolutionary techniques. In the 1930s he was dispatched as a Comintern agent to organize the Indochinese Communist Party. Working out of China, he would flit back and forth across the Vietnam border and even into Thailand, recruiting and organizing party adherents while evading French security.

For all the factual density of his narrative, Mr. Logevall should have questioned more acutely what has become, in some quarters, the conventional view of Ho: that he was a nationalist first and a devoted Marxist-Leninist distantly second. Mr. Logevall emphasizes Ho's assurances, when he was seeking international (mainly American) support shortly after World War II, that Vietnam would not be ready for communism for another "50 years."

By contrast, Mr. Logevall mentions only in passing that communist "death squads," soon after, went about assassinating non-communist political leaders in Vietnam. Likewise, he devotes too little attention to the Mao-style "land reform" launched after the Geneva Accords to consolidate the Party's control over the North, during which thousands of small landowners were murdered. Only the opening of Hanoi's archives—an unlikely prospect—will ultimately decide the issue of Ho Chi Minh's core beliefs, but a more realistic portrait of the man, behind the benign facade, can be glimpsed through his actions rather than words.

At the end of World War II, French leaders, especially Charles de Gaulle, saw the restoration of its empire as a path to France's revival as a great power. This led to a disastrous attempt to restore sovereignty over Indochina once it emerged from Japanese occupation in 1945. Mr. Logevall skillfully describes the rise of the Vietminh resistance and the French's attempts to defeat it militarily while denying the non-communist Vietnamese real independence.

He also chronicles growing American support in arms and equipment for the French war effort and the effects of American internal politics on our policies toward Asia. He contrasts what he characterizes as American Cold War rigidity with the more nuanced and flexible approach of the British, particularly Foreign Secretary Anthony Eden. Unlike Secretary of State John Foster Dulles and ultimately President Eisenhower, Eden was convinced that the U.S., like the British themselves, should recognize and deal directly with China, which was backing Ho Chi Minh. (Eden conveniently overlooked the fact that the U.S. had suffered casualties at Chinese hands not long before in Korea.)

In a different vein, "Embers of War" provides an unbalanced account of the rise of South Vietnam with Ngo Dinh Diem as its leader. In 1955, there was a contest for power in South Vietnam, which I saw firsthand as a U.S. intelligence officer between Diem and various sectarian forces led by a gangster group called the Binh Xuyen. The Binh Xuyen controlled the national police and the streets of Saigon with 7,000 well-armed men. They also controlled all gambling, the opium dens and prostitution. Diem attempted to replace the police chief, which brought on armed conflict between the Vietnamese army, which supported Diem, and the Binh Xuyen, whom the French secretly supported as a way of maintaining influence. When the contest appeared in doubt, U.S. Ambassador J. Lawton Collins, very much influenced by the French hatred of Diem as a die-hard nationalist, recommended to President Eisenhower that we replace Diem with a "coalition" government in which undoubtedly the Binh Xuyen would have continued to play a role. While Collins was in Washington

pleading his case, war broke out in Saigon between the Binh Xuyen and the army, who quickly drove the former into the swamps surrounding Saigon. Collins was overruled and U.S. support for Diem continued.

Attuned to his theme of missed opportunities, Mr. Logevall focuses on this moment as a genuine chance for the U.S. to begin to get out. However, a weak South Vietnamese government, under the cloud of renewed French colonial influence, would have lost legitimacy. The Vietnamese army would have been demoralized. Little would have stood in the way of the all-Vietnam elections in 1956 recommended by the Geneva Accords. The North, which considered "free elections" a farce and exerted iron control over its people also enjoyed an advantage in population numbers. Ho would have won handily, with "peace" to follow.

To argue for removing Diem at that time—thus giving way to a single, Ho-led Vietnam—is to ignore what was likely to follow in the South, in light of the brutal repression that occurred after the 1954 communist takeover of the North. Mr. Logevall also neglects the likely effect of a Ho-led Vietnam on the rest of Southeast Asia. Based on my experience in Laos and Thailand, a vacuum of ineffective government and security forces existed to Vietnam's immediate west through Thailand down to Malaya. Conditions were ripe for communist takeovers in Laos, Cambodia and subsequently Thailand, thus hazarding Malaya's future, where the British were already battling communist guerrillas. The so-called domino effect was no theory.

In his narrative, Mr. Logevall over-stresses the effect of Diem's Catholicism, incorrectly claiming that practically all of the village chiefs that he appointed were Catholic. He also credits the rise of an insurgency entirely to Diem-government repression. In fact, the insurgency was fomented largely by underground Vietminh cadres left behind when the North's regular forces were evacuated after the 1954 Geneva Accords. At the time, I witnessed communists leaving behind arms caches as part of their preparations to resume the conflict, as well as kidnapping youth to be trained in the North and then reinserted. Nor does Mr. Logevall, in his analysis of South Vietnam's increasing troubles, account for the U.S.'s failure to support rural development or our removal of the Vietnamese army from its domestic security role without adequately training and arming a replacement Civil Guard.

Throughout the book, Mr. Logevall makes his theme the claim by the historian Bernard Fall that the U.S. was "dreaming different dreams than the French but walking in the same footsteps." If one takes as a leitmotif the counterproductive step, in early 1965, of systematically bombing North Vietnam and then deploying American troops to

defeat the Viet Cong militarily, leaving the South Vietnamese largely as bystanders until 1968, then this characterization mostly holds. What Mr. Logevall fails to consider is whether American intervention at various points might have taken a less clumsy form, one more attuned to South Vietnamese aspirations and realities.

Arrogant and politically insensitive American leadership in the field, as personified by Ambassadors Collins, Henry Cabot Lodge and Maxwell Taylor and Gens. Paul Harkins and William Westmoreland, was part of the problem. The U.S. supported a successful coup against Diem in 1963 and then yet another, only months later, against the military junta that had deposed Diem. In addition, Kennedy's and Johnson's leading advisers, particularly Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, misunderstood the war's political dimensions. This contributed to our ill-advised decision to support the coup against Diem and our ultimate decision to deploy U.S. troops to South Vietnam in 1965.

Crucially, the U.S. failed to grasp that the war was at its heart a political battle between Vietnamese with different convictions. To prevail, the non-communist side had to attract broad support by appealing to the population's democratic aspirations. Instead, America placed its emphasis on "getting on with the war," to the detriment of taking the risk of supporting genuine democratic reform.

As a non-communist Vietnamese nationalist, Dan Van Sung, put it in the early 1960s, the war was 75% political and 25% military. But practically all American efforts were devoted to the 25%. Whether a more astute approach to South Vietnamese political development might have worked against the inherent advantages enjoyed by the North is speculation. But a democratic South Vietnam, even a shaky one, could have better sustained American public support for U.S. involvement. At the very least, it might have given the South Vietnamese the responsibility they deserved for determining the outcome under more favorable circumstances than ultimately prevailed in 1975.

—Mr. Phillips is the author of "Why Vietnam Matters."