

Vietnam's Changing Historiography: Ngo Dinh Diem and America's Leadership

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The Vietnam War has certainly produced burgeoning scholars and literature. In the decade or so after the Vietnam War ended, most scholars wrote critically of the United States' intervention in Indochina. Heated debates began to take place within books, articles, and conferences. Given the lavish attention, three scholarly views have arisen and become increasingly heated. Orthodox scholars follow the traditional doctrine that America's involvement in the war was unwinnable and unjust, while the revisionists believe that the war was a noble cause and Vietnam, below the 17th parallel, was a viable and stable country, but policies and military tactics were improperly executed. The heated debates have focused on two central issues—Ngo Dinh Diem and his reign over South Vietnam and poor leadership by American presidents and top officials. Orthodox scholars argue that Diem as a corrupt tyrannical puppet, while revisionists believe Diem was an independent leader who knew what was necessary to allow his young country to survive. According to the orthodox scholars, American presidents John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Lyndon Baines Johnson and other top officials did their best to control the situation in Vietnam, though the war was doomed from the beginning. Revisionists do not believe the war was lost on the battlefield but was lost due to poor decisions and lack of attention to the war. Recently, another group of scholars have weighed in on this subject. These scholars, post-revisionists, do not even admit defeat—arguing that the United States won the war by late 1970. The goal of this paper is to give insight on orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist views.

Ngo Dinh Diem

In Philip Catton's book, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam*, he does not attempt to whitewash any of Diem's faults but does portray Diem as a modern nationalist, determined to follow his own agenda. Diem's desire to build his own South Vietnamese state led to a coup, which the Kennedy administration supported. Catton explains that in an attempt to find a reliable president in South Vietnam, the United States assumed the position of kingmaker. Diem and his key advisers feared that the perception of their dependence on the United States tainted their credentials as nationalists, playing into the hands of the regime's enemies. Catton points out that Diem feared the Americans nearly as much as they did the Communist insurgents. Implementing his own vision of a sovereign national entity, Diem assembled the South Vietnamese peasantry for

support while reducing the regime's reliance on the United States. Catton goes on to argue that the strategic hamlet program was intended not only to defeat the National Liberation Front (NLF) but also to further free the South Vietnamese from the overbearing American control. In addition, Catton explains that Kennedy, Johnson, and top American officials did not fully understand Diem's intentions or the social and cultural situations in South Vietnam. Diem understood the necessity of American assistance, but he knew the intrusive American support would make him a puppet of Washington. Catton finally suggests that the overthrow of Diem prompted the Americanization of the war in Vietnam.¹

Keith Taylor, a leading revisionist, sparked the reevaluation of the Vietnam War in an article entitled "How I began to Teach About the Vietnam War." Taylor aims to debunk three axioms regarding the war. The first is the idea that there was not a legitimate noncommunist government in Saigon. The second misconception he addresses is the belief that the United States had no legitimate reason to be involved in Vietnam, while the third focuses on the assumption that the United States could not have won the war under any circumstance. Taylor explains that Diem was actually a competent leader—not an American lackey. Made into a scapegoat for American frustrations and misguided American advisors, Keith portrays Diem as understanding what was necessary for South Vietnam's survival, but the U.S. sponsored assassination cut his leadership short.²

While Keith Taylor sparked the reevaluation of the Vietnam War, Mark Moyar continued to push this debate further. Moyar's book, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965*, explains how the United States' government failed South Vietnam morally and politically by allowing Diem's assassination. His death put an end to his successful prosecution of the war against the Viet Cong, which obviated the controversial incursion of American troops from 1965 to 1973. Generally, Moyar says, historians view Diem as an authoritarian Asian dictator who became an oppressor as he solidified his family's stronghold over South Vietnam's government, thus becoming a less effective leader. Moyar, however, fiercely disagrees with these statements. He acknowledges the authoritarian nature of Diem's leadership, but argues for its necessity. South Vietnam was fighting for survival and needed a dictator-like leader; Diem governed in an authoritarian manner because of the unsuitability of Western-style democracy for a country dominated by a totalitarian culture. According to Moyar, in 1962 and 1963, the South Vietnamese army became increasingly skillful in intelligence gathering and in fighting under Diem's leadership. Consequently, until he was assassinated in the November 1963 coup, Diem

¹ Philip Catton, *Diem's Final Failure: Prelude to America's War in Vietnam* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002).

² Keith Taylor, "How I Began to Teach about the Vietnam War," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 43 no.4 (2004): 637-647.

successfully prosecuted the war to the verge of victory over the Viet Cong. Moyar's last chapter, "Betrayal: August 1963," states that after the assassination, everything fell apart in Vietnam. Diem's death was a tragedy for South Vietnam as well as for American policy.³

On the opposite side of the spectrum lies the orthodox scholar Robert Buzzanco and his article, "How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq." Buzzanco argues that Diem engaged in an assortment of corrupt activities that included placing his family into high political positions, dealing in the black market, and firing roughly 6,000 army officers and replacing them with more loyal but less qualified soldiers. He imprisoned over 40,000 political prisoners and executed more than 12,000, and took control of 650,000 hectares of land, which denied peasants of their livelihoods. Buzzanco also writes that if the South Vietnamese wanted Americans in their country, why were there several coups d'état to oust the Americans? To counter this fabricated belief, Buzzanco suggests that in fact, the South Vietnamese did not want American support, and that the United States' sole motivation was imperialism. In support of Buzzanco's arguments is David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*. Halberstam and Buzzanco's perceptions about Diem are closely related. Both historians believe the Diem regime lacked legitimacy and stunk of corruption.⁴

Historian Edward Miller's, *War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think About the Vietnam War*, is an article trying to separate historians Keith Taylor and Robert Buzzanco's ideas about Diem's legitimacy. Miller disagrees with Buzzanco's critical depiction of Diem as a spineless American puppet with no agenda other than appeasing American leaders. According to Miller, Buzzanco believes that Diem was "hand-picked" by American leaders in order to Americanize South Vietnam. In addition, Miller argues that Diem actively pushed for a modernized nation in South Vietnam. Diem's determination to follow this vision made him much more autonomous than Buzzanco recognizes. According to Miller, Buzzanco quotes Wesley Fishel, an American advisor to the South Vietnamese leader, saying that the government was "shaky as all hell."⁵ Buzzanco believes that Diem's only agenda was to increase his family's power, however, Miller contends that no credible evidence exists that implicates Diem as a "hand-picked" or excessively corrupt leader.⁶

³ Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam War, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

⁴ Robert Buzzanco, "How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq." Counterpunch, <http://www.counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html>; and David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973).

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Edward Miller, "War Stories: The Taylor-Buzzanco Debate and How We Think About the Vietnam War," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no. 1-2 (2006): 453-484.

Miller moves on to explain that Diem showed his independence by redistributing land. Diem, lacking interest in American land reform, pushed for his own ideas of land distribution. Instead of America's proposal of dispensing landlord's property, Diem wanted to redistribute people by transporting thousands of peasants to Land Development Centers in lightly populated areas in South Vietnam. Miller acknowledges and supports Philip Catton's study of the Strategic Hamlet Program, Diem's last modernization project. Miller notes that Diem was trying to modernize South Vietnam and had no dependency upon the United States.⁷

While Miller tries to separate Taylor and Buzzanco, though siding with Taylor, Gabriel Kolko's orthodox view portrays Diem as a corrupt and tyrannical leader. Kolko explains that by the early 1960s the United States could not overlook the increasing threat that Diem's blatant corruption and oppression posed. Kolko writes that the Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, addressed the dilemma the week after Kennedy took office, saying that the United States was "caught between pressing Diem to do things he did not wish to do and the need to convey to him American support."⁸ By 1961 Diem fully appreciated and relied on the Kennedy administration's reliance on his regime. Moreover, Diem ignored America's modest proposals, Kolko says, "at best [only] agreeing to study them."⁹

Well on his way toward self-destruction, Diem began arresting thousands of civilian non-NLF critics, political threats, and military officers—enemies that, according to Kolko, only existed in his head. Diem's oppression did not stop there. On May 8, 1963, Diem ordered the killing of nine Buddhist protesters at an anti-Diem demonstration in Hue. While the orthodox view of Kolko condemns Diem for his murder and oppression of Buddhists, Mark Moyar disagrees. Moyar writes that reporters developed friendships with Buddhist leaders—Buddhists gave reporters tips, carried protest signs in English, and made the young men feel significant. The correspondents, in return, favored stories about the Buddhist protesters. Moyar also contends that Diem gave Buddhists permission to carry out many activities that the French and Ho Chi Minh had prohibited, but animosity still loomed. Moyar goes on to explain that the Vietnamese Communists had a history of posing as monks and infiltrating Buddhist organizations, since a Vietnamese man only had to shave his head and wear a monk's robe to be considered a monk. However, Kolko argues that only a few Communist documents have been captured revealing Communist participation in the Buddhist demonstrations.¹⁰

Controversy looming around Diem still remains. Orthodox scholars adhere to the traditional views of Diem, while revisionists are

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Gabriel Kolko, *Anatomy of a War: Vietnam, the United States, and the Modern Historical Experience* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1994), 115.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

trying to investigate and reevaluate Diem's role during the Vietnam War. Both sides of this debate have credibility, however, the public and most historians would agree that the corrupt nature of Diem's authoritarian regime only hindered America's progress in Vietnam.

Poor Leadership

In the 1990s, historians began to reevaluate John F. Kennedy's role in Vietnam, leading to their argument that the young president, had he not been assassinated, would not have escalated the conflict into a major war. Kennedy supporters like Arthur Schlesinger, Howard Jones, Fred Logevall, David Kaiser, Lawrence Freedman, and others have also made this claim. Furthermore, the 1991 Oliver Stone film, *JFK*, portrays Kennedy as a dove in regards to Vietnam, and alludes to the idea that Lyndon Johnson was responsible for the escalation of the conflict. More recently, the revival of the war has gone further with Philip Catton, Keith Taylor, Mark Moyar, Ed Miller, and others claiming that America's top officials, Presidents Kennedy and Johnson, and the Joint Chiefs of Staff lost the war due to poor decisions, lack of attention, and separate agendas.

Buzzanco, agreeing with the revisionists, states, "I believe that Kennedy made bad decisions about Vietnam because he was not paying sufficient attention and Johnson did so because it was not his priority."¹¹ Buzzanco explains that the sheer mass of documents, interviews, and oral histories pertaining to the war provide sufficient evidence that Kennedy and Johnson regarded the Vietnam War as a solemn and significant matter. However, Buzzanco also argues that the Kennedy and Johnson Libraries contain millions of pages of reports and analyses from an array of agencies, military branches, and diplomatic officials, all of which avidly demonstrate the dedication of both administrations to substantial levels of attention to the war. In addition, Buzzanco questions Taylor's notion of Johnson's limited war, asking, "Should he have sent 500,000 men to Vietnam then?" He argues that the American public and congress would not have supported such a sizeable commitment, while other orthodox scholars would agree that both Kennedy and Johnson were incorrect in their policy-making.¹²

Harry Summers, a revisionist, published *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* to defend and find a more plausible interpretation of the Vietnam War. Summers contends with the notion that Vietnam was lost as a result of the poor training of American troops rather than strategy. He supports his ideas by arguing that, at the time of the Tet Offensive, the Viet Cong possessed twenty-percent of their original power. He claims that the Tet Offensive and the 1972 invasion were both horrible failures for the North Vietnam forces. Also, Summers argues that it was

¹¹ Taylor, 637-647.

¹² Buzzanco, "How I Learned to Quit Worrying and Love Vietnam and Iraq." Counterpunch, <http://www.counterpunch.org/buzzanco04162005.html>; and David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973).

not until the United States pulled out of Vietnam in 1972 that North Vietnam succeeded in victory. Bad tactical and logistical planning did not lead to the fall of South Vietnam, but rather the inadequate leadership of top American officials. The United States had done everything it set out to do, according to Summers. Providing supplies, munitions, and shelter for more than a million personnel several thousand miles from home, the United States' military also fought and won almost every engagement with the enemy. However, the United States' presidents and top officials provided only a vague and generic expectation of victory. Summers and other conservative historians, such as Lewis Sorley, Michael Lind, Edward Miller, Keith Taylor, and Mark Moyar, contend that the United States actually won the war militarily, but because of poor decisions and pathetic politicians, the war was lost.¹³

Revisionists believe that the Kennedy administration quickly began plunging deeper into the morass of the Vietnam War, while George C. Herring, an orthodox scholar, characterizes Kennedy as a cautious, hesitant, and improvisational leader. Kennedy postponed a firm commitment for nearly a year, and he only acted because of the pressures of a collapsing Diem regime. Wary of international and domestic consequences but unwilling to introduce a full-scale war, Kennedy chose a careful course, thus expanding the United States' role in Vietnam. Kennedy's unprepared and dangerous policies encouraged Diem to continue on his corruptive path. The reluctant president rejected Walt Whitman Rostow's proposal to put pressure on the Soviet Union to stop sending troops and supplies to North Vietnam, therefore entrapping the United States in a "long drawn out indecisive involvement."¹⁴ Herring points out that Kennedy became frustrated with the unmanageability of the War and never devoted his full attention to Vietnam or the potential consequences of his actions. The President and his advisors' preoccupation with day-to-day events led to shortsightedness that encumbered the formulation of a long-term solution in Vietnam. Kennedy believed that the United States knew what was best for Vietnam, and this arrogant mentality pushed the United States farther into war.¹⁵ To reinforce Herring's ideas, historians James S. Olson and Randy Robert provide further descriptions in *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1995*. All three historians believe the Kennedy and Johnson administrations were ill-prepared, hesitant, and unable to comprehend the conflicts of the Vietnam War. Consequently,

¹³ Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (California: Presidio Press, 1983).

¹⁴George C. Herring, *America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1996), 101.

¹⁵ Herring.

Kennedy and Johnson were willing to use heavy firepower to overwhelm and insert American policies.¹⁶

Herring explores President Lyndon Johnson's deteriorating situation in South Vietnam, mimicking Larry Berman's book, *Lyndon Johnson's War: The Road to Stalemate in Vietnam*. Between 1963 and 1965, Johnson transformed a limited war into an open-ended commitment within Vietnam, Herring explains. Frightened that a large-scale involvement might endanger his chances for re-election, Johnson expanded American advisors and assistances until 1965 when it appeared that South Vietnam might collapse. Over the next six months Johnson ordered a ground and air offensive against North Vietnam—pushing the United States into a major war in Indochina. After America began attacking the North Vietnamese, Johnson publicly committed the United States to defending South Vietnam from the defiant North Vietnamese. Moreover, operation Rolling Thunder, implemented by Johnson, grew from an infrequent effort into a determined program. Herring explains that questions of Johnson's comprehension of foreign policy circulated from the moment he took office. Consequently, Johnson regarded the Vietnam conflict as part of Kennedy's program he was sworn to defend.¹⁷

Agreeing with Herring's view is Fredrik Logevall's book, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam*. Logevall proves that Johnson had a variety of options that could slow or stop the escalation of the war, but the president and his advisers chose to increase the number of American troops in Vietnam, pushing America further into a war with appalling consequences. In addition, Logevall argues that both Kennedy and Johnson had stepped away from opportunities for disengaging from the involvement in Vietnam for domestic and political reasons, for example the 1964 election. Johnson's actions after Kennedy's assassination prove his desire to escalate the war secretly. Meanwhile, world leaders dissociated themselves from American involvement, and privately counseled Johnson to "cut and run." Unwilling to admit defeat, Johnson lost numerous opportunities for *détentes* and improved relations with China and the Soviet Union. Logevall also gives convincing evidence proving that individuals like Secretary of Defense Dean Rusk, Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara, and General William Westmoreland haughtily chose to pursue a war that many around them inquired and discouraged. Nevertheless, Johnson's own agenda and the bad counsel of his military advisors followed a disastrous path of further escalation, condemning about 59,000 American soldiers to premature death.¹⁸

¹⁶ James S. Olson and Randy Roberts, *Where the Domino Fell: America and Vietnam, 1945-1995* (New York: St. Martin's, 1996).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Fredrik Logevall, *Choosing War: The Lost Chance for Peace and the Escalation of War in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

The policies of American presidents and top ranking officials sucked America into an unwinnable war, H.R. McMaster argues in his revisionist based book, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam*. McMaster analyzes the decisions and viewpoints of the Johnson administration through 1966 by which time American troops were heavily engaged in Vietnam. McMaster explains that Johnson and McNamara excluded the Joint Chiefs of Staff from all major decisions on the war. Both Johnson and McNamara believed that analysis and statistics could resolve any situation in Vietnam. Unfortunately, the two men got approximately 59,000 soldiers killed in a war they all knew proved unwinnable, according to McMaster. Johnson and McNamara created a barrier which shielded them from professional counsel. As political bullies and manipulators of intelligence, Johnson and McNamara were solely responsible for bad advice from their advisors.¹⁹

Johnson was determined to commit to a limited war without the approval of Congress and hid the war's escalation from the American people. McMaster believes Johnson based all of his decisions on his domestic program—the Great Society. He goes on to argue that in late January 1965, Johnson authorized American destroyers to patrol the Gulf of Tonkin, in hopes of provoking a North Vietnamese attack. In February of that same year, Johnson introduced American ground troops into Vietnam, an irreversible commitment to the war. McMaster made an alarming assertion explaining how the Joint Chiefs of Staff viewed the president's policies as essentially flawed, but nevertheless acted to support and reinforce it—contributing to Johnson's and General Westmoreland's disastrous strategy of attrition in South Vietnam.²⁰

McMaster challenges McNamara's critics saying that McNamara never had a good relationship with the Joint Chiefs of Staff because of their inability to respond fast enough, while their ignorant administration exacerbated the Johnson administration's opinion of them. According to McMaster, McNamara lost patience with the Joint Chiefs of Staff impassiveness. The Joint Chiefs of Staff warned that McNamara's strategies would be inadequate to turn the tide against the North Vietnamese. After Johnson's approval of McNamara's plan to escalated pressure on the North Vietnamese, the Joint Chiefs of Staff's desire to further their own agendas hindered their cooperative ability to provide military advice. By the summer of 1964, according to McMaster, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had been reduced to serving "more as technicians for planners in the OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] than as strategic thinkers and advisers in their own right."²¹ He concludes that the war in

¹⁹ H.R. McMaster, *Dereliction of Duty: Lyndon Johnson, Robert McNamara, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the Lies That Led to Vietnam* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997).

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

Vietnam was lost in Washington, D.C., long before Americans realized the country was at war and assumed the sole responsibility for the fighting in 1965. Logevall and McMaster's beliefs mirror the evidence presented in other recent books such as Kaiser's *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origin of the Vietnam War*²²

Pressed by many advisors to pursue an aggressive course in Vietnam, the Kennedy administration followed suit. Kasier, a recent revisionist, believes that Robert McNamara misled Kennedy as to the status of ongoing efforts. As a result, Kennedy died believing the circumstances in Vietnam were much more manageable than what it really was. With Kennedy's assassination in 1963, the conflict began to move much more quickly toward a full blown war. Johnson wanted to be a great domestic president, however, he was less experienced in foreign policy, thus pushing the United States further into a quagmire. Unlike Logevall, Kaiser believes Kennedy's confidence and skepticism led him to resist suggestions for major involvement. According to Kasier, Kennedy was reluctant to commit American ground forces in Vietnam, while Johnson was determined to confront North Vietnam with ground forces and bombing campaigns. Johnson lacked Kennedy's sophisticated foreign policy, Kaiser says, and did not understand or value the extraordinarily negative effects that war would have on "our" relationship with the rest of the world. Kasier's book is a worthy companion piece to David Halberstam's book, *The Best and the Brightest*. Halberstam argues that it was a number of specific individuals with their own private agendas and belief systems that led to the deepening investment in the Vietnam War. Halberstam, like Kasier, notes that Kennedy purposefully denied repeated attempts by his senior advisors and the military to drastically widen actions in Vietnam. According to Kaiser, while Kennedy did allow escalation by sending military advisors, he repeatedly and quite specifically denied, both verbally and by way of documented meetings with advisors, authorization to escalate by introducing direct combat involvement. Still, this is not to suggest that Kaiser either agrees with Halberstam's thesis or to argue that he has nothing new or worthwhile to reveal—similarities do run through both books. Kaiser argues that the Vietnam War was neither necessary nor winnable, but the greatest American policy failure in foreign relations.

In contrast to Kasier, Michael Lind's revisionist book, *The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict*, describes the United States' involvement as a proper response to communist aggression and a need to assert America's strength. Lind also debunks the liberal mythology that the United States missed opportunities to befriend the North Vietnamese Communists. He asserts that there was no opportunity for a Coalition Government in South Vietnam; and the

²²McMaster.

South Vietnam's government was at least as legitimate as the North's and undoubtedly preferable.²³

In accord with Kasier and Halberstam, Lawrence Freedman's *Kennedy's War: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* and Howard Jones's *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* argues that Kennedy would never have turned Vietnam into an American war, with a huge deployment of American forces, the way Lyndon Johnson did in 1965. Both Freedman and Jones argue that Kennedy did increase the number of advisers, who sometimes assisted the South Vietnamese in battle, but never favored deploying significant ground forces. Also, Kennedy had a plan to eventually withdraw all American troops when the South Vietnamese army became more capable of controlling their government.²⁴

Daniel Ellsberg covers much of the same material that appears in David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*, but, begins his examination of the war with President Johnson and Defense Secretary McNamara claiming unprovoked enemy aggression and threats to American interests instigated the war. Within twenty hours of starting his new job at the Pentagon, and referring to the Gulf of Tonkin incident, Ellsberg writes that he already knew that each one of the assurances given by the President and Defense Secretary was false. Ellsberg explains that the intelligence did not fail in Vietnam since Presidents do get good advice from top officials, but that the position of the President combined with executive secrecy as an enabling condition permitted irrational and ineffective policies. Even before the Gulf of Tonkin, the Johnson Administration was determined to start a war with North Vietnam, unbeknownst to the American people or Congress. With the full knowledge of the President and Secretary of Defense McNamara, massive covert operations were carried out. Again, lies covered any of this up. As a result, no one could be honest. Johnson would never entertain any negative reports, nor would McNamara and the military.²⁵

Moyar depicts Johnson as a figure trapped by circumstance, quoting Johnson as saying, "It's like being in an airplane and I have to choose between crashing the plane or jumping out. I do not have a parachute."²⁶ Moyar argues against the orthodox school's view of

²³ David Kaiser, *American Tragedy: Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origin of the Vietnam War* (Cambridge Belknap Press, 2000); Michael Lind, *The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: Free Press, 1999); and David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest*.

²⁴ Lawrence Freedman, *Kennedy's War: Berlin, Cuba, Laos, and Vietnam* (New York: Oxford Press, 2000); and Howard Jones, *Death of a Generation: How the Assassinations of Diem and JFK Prolonged the Vietnam War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²⁵ Daniel Ellsberg, *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* (New York: Penguin Group, 2003).

²⁶ Moyar, 409.

American involvement in the war as “wrongheaded and unjust.”²⁷ The main villains are former Vietnam War correspondents David Halberstam and anyone else who had anything negative to say about the South Vietnamese premier Ngo Dinh Diem and positive things to say about Vietnamese Communist leader Ho Chi Minh. Moyar declares that after Diem’s assassination, Johnson had at his disposal numerous aggressive policy options that could have allowed South Vietnam to continue the war without a massive American troop involvement, but he ruled out these options because of faulty assumptions and inadequate intelligence. Therefore, Johnson had to fight a defensive war within South Vietnam’s borders in order to avoid the dreadful international consequences of abandoning the feeble country. Johnson had always wanted to avoid American ground troop intervention, but most of his advisers doubted that ground force involvement would produce an easy victory, believing instead that it would result in a long and agonizing political struggle against an enemy who might never give up. Furthermore, in June 1965, Moyar states that Johnson and his military advisers concluded that only the use of American ground forces in major combat could stop the Communist conventional forces from finishing off the South Vietnamese Army and government.²⁸

As Johnson contemplated whether to send American troops into battle, overwhelming evidence supported the conclusion that South Vietnam’s defeat would lead to either a Communist takeover or the switching of allegiance to China. Information that became available subsequently has reinforced this conclusion. The Johnson administration could have negotiated an American withdrawal from Vietnam that would have preserved a non-Communist South Vietnam for years to come, but evidence from the Communist side reveals North Vietnam’s complete refusal to negotiate such an agreement. While this may have failed, top American officials did miss some strategic opportunities of a different sort, opportunities that would have allowed them to fight from a much more favorable strategic position. Following Diem’s ouster, the United States’ military leaders and the Joint Chiefs of Staff constantly supported an invasion of North Vietnam, however, Johnson and his civilian advisers rejected this advice. Also, Moyar notes that Johnson’s failure to attack North Vietnam worked to the enemy’s advantage by assisting an enormous Chinese troop deployment into North Vietnam.²⁹

Another missed opportunity was the destruction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Johnson ignored many recommendations from the Joint Chiefs of Staff to put American ground forces into Laos in order to carry out the destruction of the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The Viet Cong insurgency could not

²⁷ Ibid., xi.

²⁸ Moyar.

²⁹ Ibid.

have brought the Saigon government close to collapse without the support of North Vietnamese men and equipment funneled into South Vietnam via the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Orthodox historians, like Halberstam, have argued that an American ground troop presence in Laos would not have stopped most of the infiltration, but new evidence proves that the United States missed some important opportunities to sever the Ho Chi Minh Trail.³⁰

Unlike all of the above authors, Lewis Sorley, a post-revisionist, does not even admit defeat. In his book, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*, he argues that General Creighton W. Abrams had succeeded in effectively winning the war by 1971, however, this victory was giving away by Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger at the bargaining table in Paris in 1972-1973. Sorley claims that General C. Westmoreland focused on "search and destroy" missions that neglected the pacification program, but after General Abrams took over, it was "a better war." Also, Westmoreland failed to provide the effective training crucial to the South Vietnamese army's ability to take the lead in the war effort. The result was an escalation of the war with heavy casualties and a rising protest in the United States.³¹

It is often said that time is the greatest healer of pain. However, even today, the Vietnam War continues to be a difficult and sore subject. As stated earlier, orthodox, revisionist, and post-revisionist scholars offer three differing views regarding this challenging period of American history. The general public and orthodox scholars seem to dispute the revisionist and post-revisionist views, partly because they are less published and carry fewer supporters in the academic world. However, the public and historians are still learning new information about the war with each passing day, and this new information will continue to give fresh insight and produce more revisionist and post-revisionist historians. The contentious debate over the Vietnam War is far from over. While the Vietnam War debate continues to loom around these three academic views, new attention has been brought to the Vietnamese side of the story. Literature regarding the war has been dominated by American scholars searching through American produced documents. As historian Huynh Kim Khanh argues, Vietnam is regarded as "a battlefield or a piece of real estate to be fought over" and its people "as passive bystanders in a historical process engineered elsewhere."³² New declassified information will continue to raise questions among historians, which will push this debate far into the future.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam* (New York: Harvest Book Harcourt, 1999).

³² Huynh Kim Khanh, "The Making and Unmaking of 'Free Vietnam,'" *Pacific Affairs* 60 (Fall 1987): 474.