

BOOKS

The Story Behind the Vietnam Story

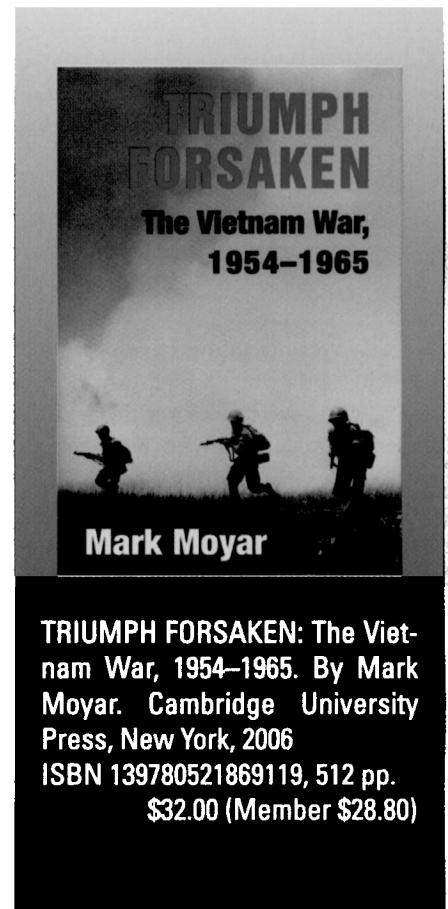
reviewed by Charles Melson

When the Marine Corps began to examine its role in the Vietnam War, it started with a volume covering the period from 1954 until 1964, the so-called "advisory and combat assistance" era. Published in 1977, it would have benefited from the background provided by this definitive examination of how the United States began its involvement in one of the major conflicts of the Cold War. Since then journalists, despite the efforts of more serious researchers, have dominated the story of Vietnam. Mark Moyer proclaims he is a revisionist in the effort to document the reasons the United States entered the conflict and justified that entry. (The author self-defines his position in reaction to an orthodox school that was critical of American efforts.) His case is made by extensive research and access to previously unavailable or underutilized sources. This research is reflected in some 83 pages of notes.

Moyer argues that much of what is orthodox about the history of the Vietnam War was not true. In this he has provided a detailed assessment of President Ngo Dinh Diem and his regime. He claims that both the John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson administrations failed to recognize the significance of North Vietnamese supply lines through Laos and Cambodia and the need to disrupt the so-called "Ho Chi Minh Trail." Moyer comes down harshly on President Johnson and his administration for not standing against the

Communists more strongly and swiftly. Related to this was the possible invasion of Communist North Vietnam, based upon Moyer's belief that the domino theory was legitimate. Inaccurate press coverage undercut the Diem regime and prevented expanded American support that might have worked short of large-scale troop deployments. While not directly related to the current conflict in Iraq, there are important similarities as well as differences in the two conflicts.

Central to this account is the coup and assassination of South Vietnamese President Diem in 1963. This event was preceded and followed by a running debate on how best to maintain Vietnam as an American ally in the struggle against communism in Southeast Asia while it was engaged in a civil war. There were several aggressive strategic options available that would have enabled South Vietnam to resist aggression from North Vietnam without large-scale American military involvement. With President Kennedy's death, President Johnson chose not to act on those options due to what the author found was inadequate intelligence and false assumptions about the nature of the Vietnamese regime and Cold War context. Along with these pivotal events, others were reconsidered—the 1960–61 National Liberation Front (Viet Cong) insurgency, the 1963 Buddhist protest movement, the 1964 battle of Ap Bac, and the role of American military advisors.



TRIUMPH FORSAKEN: The Vietnam War, 1954–1965. By Mark Moyer. Cambridge University Press, New York, 2006
ISBN 139780521869119, 512 pp.
\$32.00 (Member \$28.80)

Dr. Moyer was educated at Harvard and Cambridge Universities and taught at Cambridge, Ohio State, and Texas A&M. At present he is a professor at the Marine Corps University at Quantico. His is a complex and well-written account that set the bar high for scholarship. It is essential reading for anyone wanting a fresh understanding of one of America's longest and most misunderstood conflicts. The juncture between policy intent and reality is well illustrated and of usefulness in light of present foreign affairs. Hopefully, a future volume will cover the decade of American direct involvement and fighting between 1965 and 1975.



>Dr. Melson is chief historian for the Marine Corps Historical Division and the author of *The War That Would Not End: The U.S. Marines in Vietnam* (Hellgate Press, 1998).

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