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Vietnam Labyrinth: Allies, Enemies, and Why the US Lost the War

By Tran Ngoc Chau, with Ken Fermoye

Reviewed by Dr. William Thomas Allison, Harold K. Johnson Visiting Chair in Military History, US Army War College

Exciting new scholarship on Vietnam continues to expand our understanding of this divisive war. Scholars now apply multidisciplinary approaches to archival sources in Vietnamese, French, and English, revealing fresh, provocative perspectives, and new voices, to give the historiographic box of Vietnam a much-needed shake. Recent Vietnamese memoirs contribute significantly to this welcome trend.

Tran Ngoc Chau's *Vietnam Labyrinth*, is one such memoir. Chau's story is compellingly captivating and valuable. Rare is the story told of a Vietnamese soldier who in 1946 served with the Viet Minh against the French, changed sides in 1950, then became a key member of the South Vietnamese government, was imprisoned by that same government in 1970, then was imprisoned again by the North Vietnamese in 1975, then escaped to the United States in 1979. His story reveals much about loyalty and betrayal, service and sacrifice, hope and disillusionment, and perceptions and misunderstanding, among the Vietnamese, the French, the Americans, and even Chau himself. His is a truly distinctive lens through which to examine the thirty-year Vietnamese struggle for independence.

As a young man in September 1945, Chau rejoiced along with millions of his countrymen when Ho Chi Minh declared Vietnam's independence, but Chau did so as a nationalist, not a communist. Chau subsequently joined the Viet Minh, perceived by many in Vietnam at the time to be more nationalist than communist in its fight against France. An excellent officer and combat leader, Chau soon gained the attention of influential officers and political officials as he rose through the ranks. By 1950, however, Chau had become disillusioned with his comrades, as communist dogma resourcefully supplanted nationalism as the principal guiding force behind the Viet Minh. Ho's government conducted several mini-purges of nonbelievers while recruiting experienced and skilled leaders like Chau into the Vietnamese Communist Party. Born to a traditional Buddhist mandarin family with distant but deeply-held dynastic ties, Chau could not reconcile his love of country with his fear of what communism would mean for Vietnam. Thus, he made the difficult and dangerous decision to change sides.

It took time for Chau to prove his loyalty, but through courage, skill, leadership, and some well-placed guardian angels, he overcame his understandable doubters. Chau again quickly moved up the military/political chain—lieutenant colonel, province chief of Kien Hoa, mayor of Danang, representative in the National Assembly, and ultimately Secretary General of the National Assembly. Through his own evolution as a Vietnamese patriot, he experienced the unfolding wars for Vietnam's independence—first the French Indochina War, then the American War in Vietnam, conflicts that fused a war for independence, a civil war, a war of unification, and a Cold War-proxy war into one

confusing tragic conflict. Along the way, he formed close associations with Americans John Paul Vann (who claimed Chau knew more about defeating a communist insurgency than anyone in Vietnam) and Daniel Ellsberg (who wrote the foreword for *Vietnam Labyrinth*), among others. He was a military academy classmate of Nguyen Van Thieu, who in 1970 as president of South Vietnam had Chau unconstitutionally imprisoned and held in solitary confinement for almost four years for “advocating democratization of the South and political negotiation with the North.”

Chau’s memoir provides insight into the inner workings of the Viet Minh, the South Vietnamese government, and the French, then American, presence in South Vietnam. He gives powerful testimony to the trauma of thirty years of war on a small nation caught in the destructive vise between internal struggles and great power conflict. Chau’s most significant contribution, however, derives from his close work with American military and civilian personnel in South Vietnam. He witnessed their faulty perceptions, lack of understanding, and cultural arrogance that in his assessment undermined South Vietnam’s chances for independence. The preponderance of the American presence, the cultural illiteracy of American advisors and officials, the misplaced American backing of reactionary Vietnamese in high government positions, and the overuse of massive firepower while neglecting basic pacification principles fed South Vietnamese dependence upon the United States, undercut government legitimacy at all levels, and alienated the population.

While these conclusions are neither novel nor new, the context in which Chau presents them is original and insightful. His memoir, like Nguyen Công Luan’s *Nationalist in the Vietnam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier* (Indiana 2012), is invaluable to moving beyond an American-centric history of the Vietnam War. Defense professionals should read history, and they should read *Vietnam Labyrinth* to understand the “other” in American wars, be they ally or enemy.

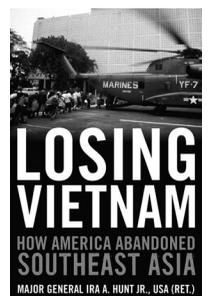
Losing Vietnam: How America Abandoned Southeast Asia

By Ira A. Hunt, Jr.

Reviewed by Dr. David Fitzgerald, School of History, University College Cork, Ireland

Over forty years after the signing of the Paris peace accords, the “post-war war” in Vietnam continues to be relatively neglected, at least by the standards of the literature of that exhaustively documented conflict. With *Losing Vietnam: How America Abandoned Southeast Asia*, Ira Hunt adds to the literature by offering an analysis of the collapse of South Vietnam and the Khmer Republic and strives to correct misperceptions about the denouement of the war; instead, he accidentally offers a window into the mindset that contributed to America’s defeat in Indochina.

Part of the Association of the US Army’s “Battles and Campaigns” series, the book uneasily straddles the line between analysis and memoir. Hunt (who also served as Chief of Staff in the 9th Infantry Division in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969) certainly had a unique vantage point on this period of the war. As Deputy Commander of the United States Support



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