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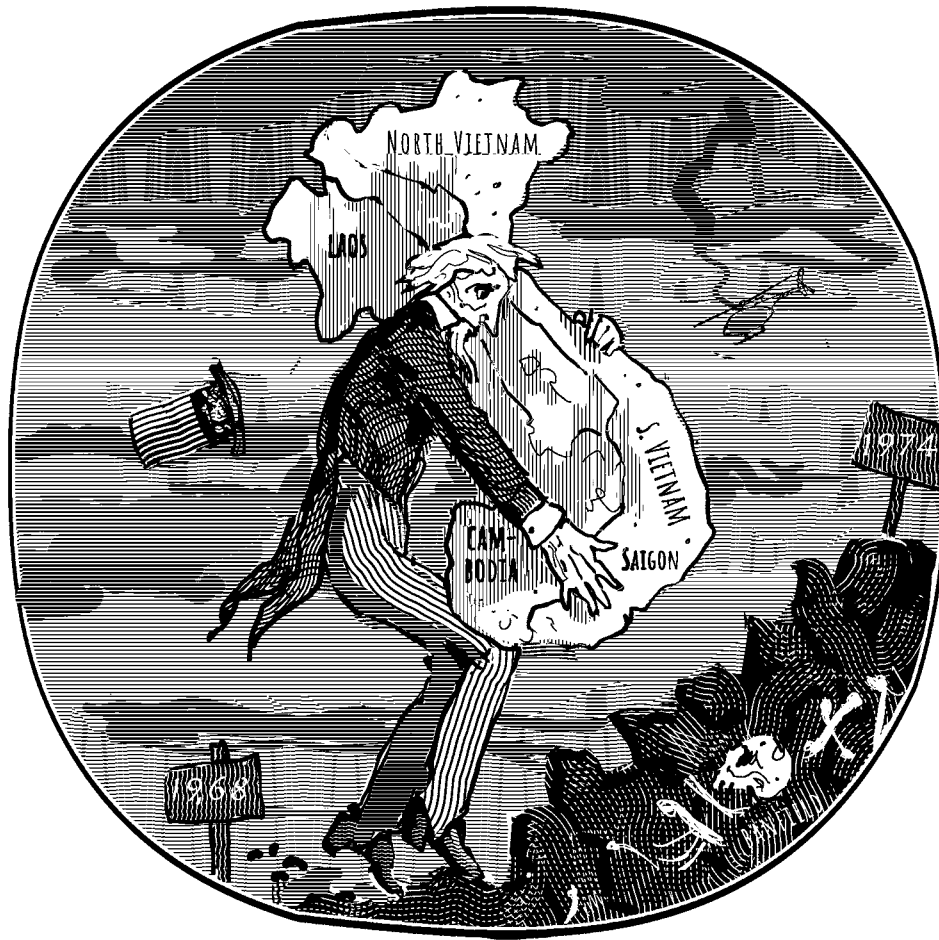
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Book Review by Mackubin T. Owens

## CHOOSING DEFEAT

*Triumph Regained: The Vietnam War, 1965–1968*, by Mark Moyer.  
Encounter Books, 732 pages, \$49.99



WRITING FIVE YEARS AGO IN THE *Claremont Review of Books* (“The Vietnam War Revisited,” Spring 2018), I criticized a ten-part PBS series, *The Vietnam War* (2017) by directors Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, arguing that, rather than an evenhanded examination of the war, the documentary merely offered “one more rendition of the antiwar case, made by those who didn’t even acknowledge the existence of counter-arguments.” Among the most important of those counter-arguments was military historian Mark Moyer’s 2006 book, *Triumph Forsaken*. Moyer’s revisionist history demonstrated, in the face of what was supposed to be settled conventional wisdom, that the United States was not destined to lose in Vietnam. Our defeat was instead the result of hesitancy and squeamishness about wartime tactics, which led to bad political and strategic decisions at all levels from Washington to Saigon.

*Triumph Forsaken* was intended as the first installment in a trilogy. It covers the period

from 1954, when the French government was ousted by Ho Chi Minh’s Communist party, the Viet Minh, up to the eve of President Lyndon Johnson’s decision to commit major American ground forces in 1965. Moyer argues that the United States had ample opportunities to ensure the survival of South Vietnam against the newly Communist North, but it failed to develop the proper strategy to do so. By far our greatest mistake was to acquiesce in the November 1963 coup that deposed and killed the South’s Prime Minister Ngo Dinh Diem, a decision that “forfeited the tremendous gains of the preceding nine years and plunged the country into an extended period of instability and weakness.” Vietnamese Communists adopted a more ambitious stance to exploit that instability. Johnson rejected several aggressive strategic options that would have permitted South Vietnam to continue the war, either without the employment of U.S. ground forces or by a limited deployment of U.S. forces in strategically advanta-

geous positions. Forgoing these options left Johnson with the choice of abandoning South Vietnam altogether—a prospect fraught with grave international consequences—or fighting a defensive war within South Vietnam at a serious strategic disadvantage.

NOW THE WILLIAM P. HARRIS CHAIR of Military History at Hillsdale College, Moyer has released the second volume of his trilogy, *Triumph Regained: The Vietnam War, 1965–1968*, which covers the critical years from the first large-scale introduction of U.S. troops in March 1965 until the Tet Offensive and its aftermath in 1968. As in *Triumph Forsaken*, Moyer skillfully weaves a narrative that ranges from diplomacy to strategy and military operations. The book is long, which may make it tough sledding for those not familiar with the outlines of the conflict (a problem exacerbated by a maddening lack of maps). It is copiously footnoted, citing not only after-action reports from U.S. units

but also North Vietnamese sources, as well as diplomatic communiqués from Washington, Saigon, Hanoi, Beijing, and Moscow. In the end, despite the convolution and difficulty of the terrain, Moyar accomplishes something of a miracle by successfully integrating the many strands of this conflict.

During the three years covered in *Triumph Regained*, clashes between U.S. and North Vietnamese forces followed a consistent pattern: First, intelligence sources would locate enemy forces. U.S. leaders would then employ the mobility afforded by helicopter assault to bring the enemy to battle. In the end, American firepower would inflict enormous casualties and the enemy would limp back to their sanctuaries in Laos and Cambodia, which were off-limits to U.S. ground operations. According to the orthodox narrative, the North Vietnamese inflicted severe casualties on American and South Vietnamese troops during this costly war of attrition. But Moyar argues that the North Vietnamese vastly overestimated the harm they were causing their enemies. To compensate for their own losses, North Vietnamese commanders in the South sent wildly exaggerated claims of battlefield success to Hanoi, encouraging North Vietnam's leaders to persist with futile tactics. Nonetheless, Moyar cites sources stationed in the North who worried that the war had shifted in America's favor. He concludes that "at the end of that period, the North Vietnamese Army lay in tatters, and its Southern proxies had all but vanished, leaving Hanoi little choice but to abandon conventional campaigns and revert to guerrilla warfare."

**T**HIS REPRESENTED A SERIOUS SETBACK in terms of the North Vietnamese strategic taxonomy, which was identified and outlined by the late expert Douglas Pike. Pike wrote excellent studies of the National Liberation Front (known by their unofficial name as the "Viet Cong"), as well as a close examination of the strategy deployed by the People's Army of Vietnam (PAVN). According to Pike, the PAVN developed a tactic they called *dau tranh* (struggle) consisting of two operational elements: *dau tranh vu trang* (armed struggle) and *dau tranh chinh tri* (political struggle). These two strategic approaches were envisioned as a hammer and anvil—or pincers—designed to crush the enemy. Armed *dau tranh* included a strategy "for regular forces," involving conventional limited-offensive warfare against traditional targets, and another for "protracted conflict," involving Maoist and neo-revolutionary guerilla tactics, including civilian targets. Political *dau tranh* included *dich van* (subversion

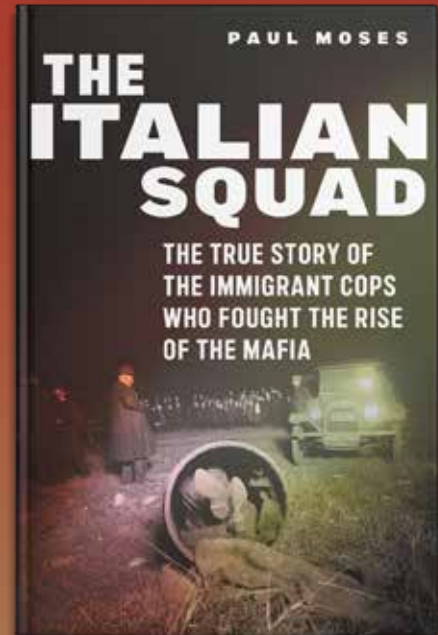
among the enemy), *binh van* (encouragement for the troops), and *dan van* (propaganda for the people).

Before America intervened directly, the PAVN was able to focus on political action supported by protracted warfare. Then, in 1965, anticipating American intervention, the PAVN shifted its focus to armed struggle involving more concerted regular force, as highlighted by the battle of Ia Drang in November 1965 and similar clashes throughout 1966. Having suffered high casualties, Hanoi reverted to protracted war in 1967 until the buildup for Tet, at which time the PAVN returned to a regular-force strategy culminating with its attacks in the Tet Offensive of January 1968 and two subsequent waves.

**W**ITH THIS KIND OF ANALYSIS, MOYAR shows that American efforts were making ground and reversing North Vietnamese strategic gains. The result is an eye-opening reassessment, especially with regard to the career of General William Westmoreland, Commander of U.S. Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (COMUSMACV) until after Tet in 1968. Before reading *Triumph Regained*, my own view of Westmoreland was greatly influenced by historian Lewis Sorely in his books *A Better War* (1999) and *Westmoreland: The General Who Lost Vietnam* (2011). Sorely argued that Westmoreland squandered four years of public and congressional support for the war by seeking to maximize the attrition of North Vietnamese forces through "search and destroy" missions in a "war of the big battalions." This tactic kept him focused on American operations, so that he did little to train the Vietnamese army. According to Sorely, "search and destroy" operations were usually indecisive (since the enemy could avoid battle unless it was advantageous for him to accept it), dangerous to Vietnamese civilians, and costly to American forces.

Westmoreland's successor as COMUSMACV, Creighton Abrams, incorporated the South Vietnamese troops into a policy of "one war," integrating all aspects of the struggle against the Communists. The result, says Sorely, was "a better war" in which Americans and South Vietnamese essentially achieved the military and political conditions necessary for South Vietnam's survival as a viable political entity.

But Sorely's error—and mine—was failing to recognize that the conditions for Abrams's successes after 1968 were created by Westmoreland's tactics. Given the circumstances he faced, including restrictions imposed by civilian leaders, he had no alternative to the war of attrition he fought.



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As Moyar explains, Westmoreland's critics claim that his emphasis on enemy casualties had little meaning in a war that was essentially a struggle for the loyalties of civilian populations. But once Hanoi shifted from protracted conflict to regular-force conventional warfare in 1965, that criticism became moot. "The two military activities most vital to North Vietnam's ultimate objective of conquering South Vietnam, the destruction of opposing forces and the capture of cities, required great numbers of troops."

**A**LTHOUGH MOYAR DOES NOT MAKE THE point explicitly, he demonstrates that Abrams was probably able to fight his "better war" in 1969 because American and South Vietnamese forces had killed enough North Vietnamese soldiers in places like Ia Drang, Dak To, Pleiku, and Kontum. These successes, followed by the bloody U.S. defense against the Tet Offensive and subsequent waves of attack, made Abrams's "one war" possible.

A major charge against Westmoreland is that the United States routinely inflated the North Vietnamese Army's "body count." But the North Vietnamese sources that Moyar cites invariably confirm Westmoreland's figures. The undeniable conclusion is that Westmoreland's "war of attrition," unsightly as it may have been to many critics, paved the way for subsequent U.S. successes. And the fact is that Abrams continued to employ tactics against the PAVN which differed little from Westmoreland's, targeting the enemy's bases along the Laotian and Cambodian border. Since the North Vietnamese lacked heavy transport within South Vietnam, they had to position supplies forward of their sanctuaries before launching an offensive. Fighting was still heavy, as exemplified by major actions in the A Sau Valley during the first half of 1969. But such operations now disrupted the North Vietnamese offensive timetables and improved the security of the coastal areas. Criticism of

Westmoreland was ultimately more ideological and political than strategic: his reputation was the victim of public distaste for the necessary procedures of war.

**T**HAT DISTASTE HAMPERED THE WAR effort increasingly as the years wore on. America's substantial success on the ground in South Vietnam was in spite of self-imposed political restrictions on bombing, troop levels, interdiction, and attacks against Communist sanctuaries in Laos, Cambodia, the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), and North Vietnam itself. As Moyar shows using North Vietnamese sources, the assumptions underlying these restrictions were wrong across the board.

For instance, when the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) recommended sending ground forces into Laos and Cambodia to cut North Vietnamese infiltration routes, President Johnson and Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara rejected the proposal. They did so on the basis of an assessment by civilian experts, who claimed these measures would be ineffective and invite Chinese intervention. Moyar uses North Vietnamese, Chinese, and Soviet sources to show that these advisers were wrong. When the JCS urged Johnson to abandon McNamara's plan to gradually escalate bombing of North Vietnam and unleash U.S. airpower, McNamara argued that North Vietnam had a vast unused logistical capacity and thus could withstand additional bombing. North Vietnamese accounts reveal that North Vietnam had no unused capacity, and in fact had to delay operations repeatedly because of supply shortages. More damage to their logistical system would have constrained their operations further and saved American lives. Moyar does not say so, but his analysis suggests that after the massive losses suffered by the North Vietnamese during the Tet Offensive and two subsequent waves, the United States and its allies were on the cusp of victory at the end of 1968.

Perhaps, having fought in Vietnam (September 1968–October 1969), I am biased in Moyar's favor. I used to joke about having a bumper sticker that read, "I don't know what happened. When I left we were winning." There have been many revisionist accounts of Vietnam—this one will surely not settle all questions about the war's history. But in a crowded field, Moyar's book stands apart for the abundance of research and original source material he brings to bear in support of his argument. When it comes to scholarly diligence, he has no equal, and no review can do him full justice. His bold reinterpretation of the war is so meticulously documented that even those who adhere to the orthodox view must take it seriously. At a minimum, Moyar has made it necessary to look at alternative interpretations of America's Vietnam enterprise, reminding us that countries are not destined to win or lose wars. Victory or defeat depends on real decisions and strategies, made and implemented by real leaders. Fate does not win or lose wars: people do.

The third volume of Moyar's trilogy will cover 1969 to 1975, the "forgotten years" of the Vietnam War, no doubt correcting the argument that the military effort after Tet was nothing more than a holding action. The approach followed by Westmoreland's successor constituted a positive strategy for ensuring the survival of South Vietnam, employing diminishing resources in manpower, materiel, money, and time as they raced to render the South Vietnamese capable of defending themselves before the last American forces were withdrawn.

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